

Marcel Ray Duriez

Shadow's

Interval: 1 Overshadows of Grayson

Part:

1

I roll my eyes in despair and see the pale girl with brown hair with exceptionally large blue eyes on her face staring at me and giving up. My only option is to keep my lost hair in 2 tails of braids, and I hope to look semi-modern and older than I am.

I shudder at the frustration in the mirror. My hair - she just will not act, damn Mary Smith for being sick and subjecting me to this ordeal. I must study for my final exams, which are next week, but here I try to brush my hair into submission. I should not sleep with her down and wet. I should not sleep with her wet. Reciting this slogan several times, I try, again, to bring it under control with the brush.

Maury is my roommate, and today of all days she has chosen to surrender to the Covid-19.

Therefore, she could not participate in the interview she had organized to do, with a mega-industry-alist tycoon that I never heard of, for the high school student magazine.

So, I volunteered. I have the last exams for an essay to complete, and I must work this afternoon, but no - today I must drive a hundred and sixty-five miles to downtown New York to meet the enigmatic CEO of Maury Novel Enterprises Inc.

As an exceptional entrepreneur and major donor at our high school, his time is extremely valuable - much more expensive than my time - but he gave Maury an interview. A real coup, you tell me. her extracurricular activities.

Maury is stationed on the couch in the living room.

'Naddalin, I am sorry. It took me nine months to get this interview. It will take another six to reschedule, and both of us will be out by then. As an editor, I cannot blow this up. Please, Maury begs me in her racing voice, sore throat. How do you do it even though it looks gamine and gorgeous, strawberry blonde hair in place and bright green eyes, though now red-rimmed and runny? I ignore my unwelcome sympathy.

'Of course, I will go Maury. Do you want some Nightie, Aspen, or Tylenol?'

'Aspen, please. Here are the questions and my mini-disc recorder. Just click on the record here. Without notes, I will write everything down.'

'I know nothing about him,' I murmured, trying, and failing to suppress my growing panic.

'The questions will see you through, go. It is a long journey. 'Okay, I am going. Get back to bed. I made some soup for you to heat up later.' I stared at her fondly. Just for you Maury, am I going to do this? 'I will. Good luck. Thank you, Naddalin - as always, you are my savior.' I collected my bag, smiled at it sarcastically, and then exited the door into the car. I cannot believe I let Maury talk to me about this. But then Maury can talk to anyone about anything. You will be an exceptional journalist. She is understandable, powerful, persuasive, argumentative, beautiful - and she is my best friend and best friend.

The roads were empty and odd, it is early, and I do not have to be in New York until 2 in the afternoon. Luckily, Maury loaned me her Mercedes CLK sports car. I am not sure Wanda, my old Volkswagen Beetle, will start the journey in time. Oh, Merc is a fun ride, and miles drift away as I pedal to the metal. My destination is the headquarters of Mr. Mori International Corporation. It is a colossal twenty-story office building, all curved glass, and steel, a utilitarian fiction of an architect, with the Murray House writing discreetly in steel on the glass front doors. As I hit a quarter to a second, I was so relieved not to be late entering the huge - and frankly frightening - hallway of glass, steel, and white sandstone. Behind the silent sandstone desk, a young blond woman, incredibly attractive and caring, smiles at me with pleasure. She is wearing a blazer, a sharp charcoal suit jacket, and a white shirt that I have ever seen. Looks clean.

'I'm here to see Mr. Morey snarling Black by Mary Smith.' Excuse me one moment, Miss Black. Her eyebrow arched slightly while I was shyly standing in front of her. I began to wish I had borrowed one of Maury's formal jackets instead of wearing my navy-blue jacket. I put in the effort and wore my only skirt, my sensible knee-length brown shoes, and a blue jacket. For me, that is smart. I put one of my runaway locks behind my ear where I pretend it does not scare me. 'Miss Smith is expected. Please log in here, Miss Black. You will want the last elevator on the right, press to get to the 20th floor.' She smiles sweetly at me, undoubtedly enjoying when I check-in. She gave me a security clearance stamped visitor very firmly on the front. I cannot help my smile.

Certainly, I just visit. I do not fit in here at all. Nothing changes, I sigh from the inside. To thank her, I walked to the bank of the elevators, past my two security men, who are much more elegant than I am in their elegant black suits. The elevator

leads me at final speed to the 20th floor. The doors open, and I am in another big hallway - again all the glass, steel, and white sandstone. I face another sandstone desk and another young blond-haired person in elegant black and white clothes rises to greet me. 'Miss Black, can you wait here, please?'

She points to a seating area with white leather chairs. Behind the leather chairs is a spacious, glass-walled conference room with an equally spacious dark wood table and no less than twenty matching chairs around. Moreover, there is a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the New York skyline looking out onto the city sounding. It is an amazing sight, and I was temporarily paralyzed by the view. Fabulous. I sit, fish questions out of my bag, go through it and internally curse Maury for not providing him with a brief résumé. I do not know a thing about this guy that I am about to meet.

He could be in his ninety or thirty. Uncertainty is annoying, and my nerves are resurfacing, making me tired. I never felt comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring to remain anonymous in a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously in the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, wrapped in a chair in a campus library. Do not sit tight in a huge edifice of glass and stone.

I turn my eyes on myself. Get a grip, Black. Judging from the building, which is both clinical and ultra-modern, I think is in his 40s: fit, tanned, and blonde hair to suit the rest of the staff. Another flawless chic blond-haired person appears from the big door on the right. What is with all the immaculate blond-haired people like Stepford here? Taking a deep breath, she stood up. 'Miss Black?' Another blond-haired person asks. Yes, I track and clear my throat. 'Yes.' There, he seemed more confident. 'Mister Murray will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket?' 'I beg you.' I struggle to wear the jacket. 'Have you been offered any refreshments?' 'Or not.'

Oh Dear, is the number one blond-haired person in trouble? The blonde number two frowned and looked at the young lady on the desk. 'Do you like tea, coffee, water?' She asks, and she turns her attention to me. 'A glass of water. Thank you,' I mumbled. 'Olivia, please bring a glass of water, Miss Black.' Her voice is stern. Olivia at once takes off and rushes toward a door on the other side of the hallway. 'My apologies, Miss Black, Olivia is our new intern.'

Please sit down. Mister Morey will be another five minutes.' Olivia returns with a glass of ice water. 'Here you go, Miss Black.' 'Thank you.' Blonde No. 2 walks towards the big desk, her heels clicking and echoing on the sandstone floor. She sits, and they both carry on. Mister Morey might insist that all his employees be blond. I wonder carelessly if this is legal when opening the office door and a tall, tall African American man dressed in classy and attractive clothes with short dreads exits.

You have worn the wrong clothes. He turns around and says through the door. 'Golf, this week, Morrie.' I cannot hear the response. He turns, sees me, and smiles, his dark eyes curl at the corners. Olivia jumped and called the elevator. It looks like she excels at jumping out of her seat. She is more nervous than me! 'Good evening ladies,' he said as he left through the sliding door.

'Mister Murray will see you now, Miss Black. Do not do it,' says girl 2. I stand shaking trying to suppress my nerves. Collecting my bag, I left the glass of water and went to the partially open door. 'You don't have to be knocked - just get in.' She smiles sweetly. I pushed the door open and stumbled, slumped on my feet, and fell vertically into the office. Double crap - me and my left foot! I am on my hands and knees at the entrance to Mr. Murray's office, and the gentle hands around me help me stand up. I am so embarrassed, damn my crap.

I must harden myself to peek. Holy cow - it is exceedingly small. 'Miss Smith.' A long hand reaches out to me with his fingers when I am straight. 'I am Grayson. Are you okay, would you like to sit down?' So small - and cute, so cute. He is tall, wearing a gorgeous gray suit, white shirt, black tie with unruly dark copper hair, and thick, bright gray eyes looking at me subtly. It takes a moment to find my voice. 'Um. Actually -' he muttered. If this man is over thirty then I am a monkey's uncle. Dazed, I put my hand in his hand and shake hands.

When our fingers touch, I feel a strange shudder running through me. I pull my hand in a hurry, embarrassed. It must be fixed. I blinked quickly, and my eyelids matched my heart rate. 'Miss Smith is nervous, so she sent me. I hope you do not mind, mister-um-sir.' 'And you?' His voice is warm, and he may be amusing, but this can be hard to tell from his unemotional expression. He appears mildly caring but is polite.

'Snarling Black. I am studying English literature with Maury, Umm... Maury... Um... Miss Smith in Washington State.' He simply says, 'I see.' I think I can see the ghost of a smile in his expression, but I am not sure. 'Would you like to sit down?' He waves me towards a white leather L-shaped sofa. His office is just too big for one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows is a huge modern dark wood desk that six people can comfortably dine around. Matches with the sofa side coffee table. Everything else is white - the ceiling, floors, and walls except on the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small panels hangs, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. It is gorgeous - a series of forgotten mundane objects drawn with such fine, photographic detail. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

'Local artist. Toron,' Morrie said when he caught my eye. Raise the ordinary to the extraordinary, 'she murmured, distracted from him and the paintings. He

shakes his head aside and looks at me intently. He replied, 'I couldn't agree more, Miss Black,' in a soft voice and for some inexplicable reason I find myself blushing.

Aside from the panels, the rest of the office is cool, clean, and my bed. I wonder if it reflects the personality of Adonis who Billie fully plunges into one of the white leather chairs opposite me. I shook my head, disturbed by the direction of my thoughts, and took Maury's questions back from my bag. Next, I set up the little disc recorder and myself all my fingers and thumbs and dropped it twice on the coffee table in front of me. Mister Morey says nothing, waits patiently - I hope - because I am increasingly embarrassed and confused. When I gathered the courage to look at him, he was watching me, one hand resting in his lap and the other scaling his chin and trailing a long index finger across his lips. He is trying to suppress a smile. 'Sorry' I stuttered. 'I am not used to this.'

'Take all the time you need, Miss Black,' he says. 'Do you mind if I record your answers?' 'After I had a lot of trouble setting up the recorder - would you ask me now?' I flush. It is bothering me, I hope. Blink of an eye in the face, not sure what to say, and he pities me as he softens. 'No, I don't mind.' 'Did Maury, I mean Miss Smith, explain the reason for the interview?' 'Yes. To appear in the graduation issue of the student newspaper, where I will award degrees at this year's graduation ceremony.' Oh! That is news for me, and I am temporarily busy with the idea that someone who is not much older than me - well, six years or so, well, hugely successful, but still - he is going to give me my testimonial. He frowned, drawing my lost attention to the task at hand.

'Good,' I swallowed her nervously. 'I have some questions, Mr. Maury.' I soften a stray strand of hair behind my ear. 'I thought you might do that,' he says. He is laughing at me. My cheek warms up upon awareness, and I sit down and cross my shoulders trying to look taller and scarier. By pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look professional. 'You are so young that you amassed such an empire. How much do you owe your success?'

I glance at it. His smile is sad, but he appears mysteriously frustrated. 'Business is all about people, Miss Black, and I am incredibly good at judging people. I know how they work, what makes them thrive, what does not distinguish them, what inspires them, how to motivate them. A team, and I reward them well.' Pause and fix me with his gray look. 'My belief is to achieve success in any scheme. One must master this scheme, know it inside and out, and know every detail. I work hard, hard to do so. I make decisions based on logic and facts. I have an instinct that can discover and nurture an innovative idea. And good people. In sum, it is always up to the good people.'

'Maybe you're just lucky.' This is not on Maury's list - but he is overly arrogant. His eyes glow in surprise. 'I do not share luck or serendipity, Miss Black. The harder you work; the more luck seems to be. It is about having the right people on your team and directing their energies accordingly. It was Harvey Firestone who said, 'The growth and development of people are the highest calling for leadership.'

'You are a control freak.' Words came out of my mouth before I could stop them. 'Oh, I am in control of everything, Miss Black,' he said without leaving a trace of humor in his smile. I looked at him, and he was holding my gaze steady, unemotional.

My heartbeat accelerated, and the face flushed again. Why does he have such a nerve-wracking effect on me? His overwhelmingly beautiful appearance. The way his eyes caught my face. The way he hits his index finger on his lower lip, I hope he stops doing that. 'Moreover, tremendous power is obtained by reassuring yourself in your secret dreams that you were born to control things,' he continues in a tender voice. 'Do you feel you have tremendous power?' Megalomaniac. 'I employ more than forty thousand people, Miss Black.'

It gives me a certain sense of responsibility - strength if you like. If I decide that I am no longer interested in the telecom business and sell it, 30,000 people will still have a challenging time making their mortgage payments. About a month.

'My mouth opens. I am amazed at his lack of humility.' 'Don't you have an answer table?' I ask, villain. 'I own my company. I do not have to answer the board. He raises his eyebrows at me. I rinse. Of course, I would have known this if I had done the research. But damn, he is too overconfident. You have changed sides. 'Do you have interests outside of your business?

I know how tenacious Maury can be. That is why I am sitting here squirming uncomfortably under his penetrating gaze when I should be studying for my exams.

'We cannot eat money, Miss Black, and there are too many people on this planet who do not have enough to eat.'

'It sounds very philanthropic. Is it something that you are passionate about feeding the poor of the world?'

He shrugs, very uninviting.

'This is smart business,' he whispers, even though he is dishonest. It does not make sense - feeding the world's poor I cannot see the financial benefits of this, only the virtue of the ideal. I glance at the next question, confused by his attitude.

'Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?'

"I don't have a philosophy as such. Perhaps a guiding principle - Carnegie's: 'A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his mind can take possession

of whatever he is entitled to. 'I am very singular, motivated. I like being in control - of myself and those around me.'

'So, you want to own things?' You are a control freak.

'I want to deserve to own them, but yes, in the end, I do.'

'You are the ultimate consumer.'

'I am.' He smiles, but the smile does not touch his eyes. Again, this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I cannot help but think we are talking about something else, but I am, stumped as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising or it is just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Maury has enough material now. I look at the next question.

'You've been adopted. How much do you think that shaped the way you are?' Oh, it is personal. I look at him, hoping he is not offended. His brow furrows.

'I have no way of knowing.'

My interest is piqued.

'How old were you when you were adopted?

'It's a matter of common knowledge, Miss Black.' His tone is severe. I blush again. Shit.

Yes of course - if I had known I was doing this interview, I would have done some research.

I pass quickly.

'You had to sacrifice family life for your job.'

'It is not a question.' He is laconic.

'Sorry.' I squirm and he made me feel like a stray child. I will try again. 'Did you have to sacrifice family life for your job?'

'I have a family. I have siblings and two loving parents. I am not interested in extending my family beyond that.'

'Are you gay, Mr. Maury?'

He inhales sharply and I cringe, mortified. Shit. Why didn't I use some sort of filter before reading this directly? How do I tell him I am just reading the questions?

Damn Maury and his curiosity!

'No Naddalin, I am not.' He raises his eyebrows, a cold glint in his eyes. He does not seem happy.

'I apologize. It is uh... written here. It is the first time he is pronounced my name. My heart rate has picked up and my cheeks are warming up again. Nervously, I tuck my loose hair behind my ear.'

He tilts his head to one side.

'Aren't those your own questions?'

Blood is flowing from my head. Oh no.

'Uh... no. Maury - Miss Smith - she compiled the questions.'

'Are you colleagues in the student newspaper?' Oh shit. I have nothing to do with the student newspaper. It is his extracurricular activity, not mine. My face is inflamed.

'No. She is my roommate with me after- I dropped out of high school and need a haven yet was made to go back a year or more behind my class.'

He rubs his chin in silent deliberation, his gray eyes appreciating me.

'Did you volunteer to do this interview?' he asks, his voice deadly calm.

Wait, who is supposed to interview who His eyes burn my eyes, and I am compelled to answer with the truth.

'I was drafted. She is not doing well.' My voice is weak and sorry.

'It explains a lot of things.'

There is a knock on the door and blonde number two enters.

'Mr. Maury, forgive me for interrupting you, but your next meeting is in two minutes.'

'We're not done here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting.'

Andrea hesitates, looking at him gaping. She seems lost. He slowly turns his head to face her and raises his eyebrows. She blushed a bright pink. Oh good. It is not just me.

'Alright, Mr. Maury,' she mumbles, then leaves. He frowns and turns his attention back to me.

'Where were we, Miss Black?'

Oh, we are back to 'Miss Black' now.

'Please don't let me stop you from anything.'

'I want to know about you. It is fair.' His gray eyes shine with curiosity. Double shit. Where is he going with that? He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and closes his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very... distracting. I swallow.

'There's not much to know,' I said, blushing again.

'What are your plans after you graduate?'

I shrug my shoulders, dazzled by his interest. Come to New York with Maury, find accommodation, find a job. I did not think beyond my finals,

'I did not make any plans, Mr. Maury. I just need to take my final exams.'

What I should be studying for now rather than sitting in your lavish, chic, and sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

'We have a great internship program here,' he said calmly. I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Does he offer me a job?

'Oh. I will keep that in mind,' I whisper, completely confused. 'Although I am not sure where I belong here. Oh no. I think aloud again.

'Why do you say that?' He tilts his head to one side, intrigued, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

'It's obvious, isn't it?' I am uncoordinated, scruffy, and I am not blonde.

'Not mine,' he whispers. His gaze is intense, all humor is gone, and strange muscles deep in my stomach suddenly contract. I take my eyes off her scrutiny and blindly stare at my knotted fingers. What is going on, I must go - now. I lean forward to retrieve the recorder.

'Would you like me to show you around?' he asks.

'I'm sure you're way too busy, Mr. Maury, and I've got a long drive.'

'Are you coming back to OVHS in York?' He looks surprised, even anxious. He looks out the window. It started raining. 'Well, you better drive safe.' His tone is severe, authoritarian. Why should he care 'Do you have everything you need?' he adds.

'Yes sir,' I replied as I put the recorder back in my satchel. His eyes narrow, speculatively.

'Thanks for the interview, Mr. Maury.'

'The pleasure is mine,' he said, more polite than ever.

As I get up, he gets up and holds out his hand to me.

'Until we meet again, Miss Black.' And that sounds like a challenge, or a threat, I do not know what. I frown. When will we ever see each other again? I shake his hand once more, amazed that this strange current between us is still there. It must be my nerves.

'Mr. Maury. I nod at her. Moving with agile athletic Billie towards the door, he opens it wide.

'I just assure you to walk out the door, Miss Black.' He gives me a small smile.

He is referring to my earlier less than elegant entry into his office. I rinse.

'This is very considerate, Mr. Maury,' I crack, and his smile widens. I am glad you find me entertaining, I look inwardly, entering the lobby. I am surprised when he follows me. Andrea and Olivia both look up, equally surprised.

'Did you have a coat? Maury asks.

'Yes.' Olivia jumps up and retrieves my jacket, which Maury takes from her before she can hand it back to me. He holds it and, feeling ridiculously embarrassed, I shrug my shoulders.

Maury puts his hands on my shoulders for a moment. I gasp at the contact. If he notices my reaction, he does not reveal anything. His long index finger presses the elevator button, and we wait - awkwardly on my part, coldly overpowered by his.

The doors open and I desperately hurry to escape. I need to get out of here. When I turn to look at him, he is leaning against the door next to the elevator with one hand on the wall. He is exceptionally beautiful. It is entertaining. His burning gray eyes stare at me.

'Naddalin,' he said in farewell.

'Grayson,' I answer. And luckily, the doors close.

My heart beats wildly. The elevator arrives on the first floor, and I rush as soon as the doors open, tripping once, but luckily not sprawling across the immaculate sandstone floor. I run for the large glass doors and am free in the bracing, cleansing, and humid New York air. As I lift my face, I welcome the cool, refreshing rain. I close my eyes and take a deep cleansing breath, trying to regain what is left of my balance.

No man has ever affected me like Grayson Maury, and I cannot understand why.

Is it his appearance? His civility, his wealth, his power, I do not understand my irrational reaction.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief. What is the name of Heaven was about learning against one of the building's steel pillars, I valiantly tried to calm down and collect my thoughts? I shake my head. Holy shit - what was that? My heart is stabilizing at its steady pace, and I can breathe normally again. I head for the car.

As I leave the city limits, I start to feel stupid and embarrassed as I replay the interview in my mind. Surely, I am overreacting to something imaginary. Okay, so he is extremely attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself - but on the other hand, he is arrogant, and despite all his impeccable manners, he is autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface.

An involuntary shiver runs through my spine. He might be arrogant, but then he has a right to be - the accomplished so much at such an early age. He does not gladly suffer fools, but why should he again? I am irritated that Maury did not give me a brief bio.

As I navigate along I-5, my mind continues to wander. I am puzzled as to what motivates someone to be successful. Some of his answers were so cryptic - like he had a hidden agenda. And Maury's questions - ugh! Adoption and ask him if he was gay! I am shivering. I cannot believe I said that. Ground, swallow me up now! Whenever I think about this question in the future, I will cringe in embarrassment. Damn Mary Smith!

I check the speedometer. I drive more carefully than I would on another occasion. And I know it is the memory of two penetrating gray eyes staring at me, and a stern voice telling me to drive carefully. Shaking my head, I realize that Maury is more like a man who doubles his age.

Forget it, Naddalin, I am scolding myself. I decided that overall, it has been a remarkably interesting experience, but I should not dwell on it. Put it behind you. I never have to see him again. I am immediately acclaimed by this thought. I turn on the MP3 player and turn up the volume, sit down and listen to indie rock music while pressing the accelerator.

By hitting 1-5, I realize that I can drive as fast as I want.

We live in a small community of duplex apartments in York, Washington, close to the York campus of OVHS. I am lucky - Maury's parents bought the place for her, and I am paying peanuts for the rent. He has been home for four years now. As I step outside, I know Maury is going to want a detailed report, and she is tenacious. At least she has the mini-disc. I hope I do not have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

'Naddalin! You are back.' Maury is sitting in our living room surrounded by books. She is studying for the finals - although she is still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little bunnies, the ones she keeps for the aftermath of her break-up with boyfriends, for various illnesses, and bad depression. general mood. She leaps up to me and hugs me tightly.

'I was starting to worry. I expected you to come back sooner.'

'Oh, I thought I had an enjoyable time because the interview was over.' I wave my hand at the mini-disc burner.

'Naddalin, thank you so much for doing this. I owe you; I know. What was it like? How was it?' Oh no - there we are, the Murray Smith Inquisition.

I find it difficult to answer his question. What can I say?

'I am glad it is over, and I do not have to see him again. He was intimidating, you know.' I shrug my shoulders. 'He's extremely focused, intense even - and young. Really young.'

Maury looks at me innocently. I frown at him.

'Don't you look so innocent? Why didn't you give me a biography? Maury squeezes a hand over his mouth.

'Damn, Naddalin, I'm sorry - I didn't think so.'

I blow.

'Most of the time he was courteous, formal, a little stuffy - like he was old before his time. He does not speak like a twenty-year-old man. How old is he anyway?

'Twenty-seven. Damn, Naddalin, I am sorry. I should have informed you, but I was in such a panic. Let me have the mini-disc, and I will start transcribing the interview.'

'You look better. Did you eat your soup?' I ask, eager to change the subject.

'Yes, and it was delicious as usual. I feel a lot better.' She smiles at me gratefully. I am looking at my watch.

'I must run. I can still do my shift at Eastwood.'

'Naddalin, you will be exhausted.'

'I am fine. I will see you later.'

I have been with Eastwood since I started at OVHS. It is the largest independent hardware store in the Pittsburgh area, and over the four years I have worked here I have grown to know a bit more about everything we sell - although, ironically, I am crap in any DIY. I leave it all to my father. I am much more of a girl curled up with a book in a comfortable chair by the fire. I am glad I can make my change because it gives me something to focus on, it is not Grayson Maury. We are busy - it is the start of the summer season, and people are redecorating their homes. Mrs. Eastwood is happy to see me.

'Naddalin! I thought you were not coming today.'

'My date did not last if I thought. I can do a few hours.'

'I am so glad to see you.'

She sends me to the store to start restocking the shelves, and I am soon absorbed in the task.

When I get home later, Maury is wearing headphones and working on her laptop.

Her nose is still pink, but she has teeth in a story, so she concentrates and bangs furiously. I am completely exhausted - exhausted from the long drive, grueling maintenance, and being rushed to Eastwood's. I collapse on the couch, thinking about the essay I need to complete and all the studies I did not do today because I was stuck with... him.

'You have good things here, Naddalin. Good game. I cannot believe you did not agree to show you around. He wanted to spend more time with you.'

She gives me a fleeting questioning look.

I blush and my heart rate increases inexplicably. Surely that was not the reason he just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was the expert in everything he investigated. I realize I am biting my lip and I hope Maury does not notice. But she seems absorbed in her transcription. 'I mean what you mean by formal. Did you take any notes?' she asks.

'Uh... no, I didn't.'

'That's good. I can still make a complimentary article with that. Too bad we do not have original photos. Beautiful son of a bitch, right?'

I rinse.

'I suppose.' I try to appear disinterested and think I am successful.

'Oh, come on, Naddalin - even you can't be immune to her appearance.'

She arched a perfect eyebrow at me.

Shit! I distracted her with flattery, always a good ploy.

'You probably would have gotten a lot more from him.'

'I doubt it, Naddalin. Come on - he practically offered you a job. Since I forced this on you at the last minute, you did very well. She looks at me speculatively. I make a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

'So, what did you really think of him?' Damn, she is curious. Why can't she just let it go?

'He's very driven, controlling, arrogant - scary really, but very charismatic. I can understand the fascination,' I add honestly, as I look around the door, hoping that will silence her for the last time.

'You, fascinated by a man, this is a first,' she sniffs.

I start to put together the ingredients for a sandwich so she cannot see my face.

'Why did you want to know if he was gay? That was the most embarrassing question. I was mortified, and he was pissed off that he was being asked too.' I frown at the memory.

'Whenever he's on the pages of the company, he never has a date.'

'It was embarrassing. It was all embarrassing. Glad I never have to watch it again.'

'Oh, Naddalin, it could not have been that bad. He seems pretty taken with you.'

Caught With Me Now Maury is ridiculous.

'Do you want a sandwich?'

'Please.'

We are not talking about Grayson Maury again that night, much to my relief. After we have eaten, I can sit at the dining table with Maury, and while she is working on her article, I am working on my essay on Tess des D'Urbervilles. Damn, but this woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century. By the time I finish, it is midnight and Maury has been in bed for a long time. I walk to my room, exhausted, but happy to have accomplished so much for a Monday.

I snuggle up in my tin bed, wrapping my mom's quilt around me, close my eyes, and fall asleep instantly. That night, I dream of dark places, cold white floors, and gray eyes.

The rest of the week I go into my studies and work at Eastwood's. Maury is also busy compiling the latest edition of her student magazine before having to hand it over to the new publisher while preparing for her finals. On Wednesday she is much better, and I no longer must put up with the sight of her pink flannel pajamas with too many bunnies. I call my mom in Georgia to check it out, but also to wish me good luck with my final exams. She keeps telling me about her latest business in candle making - my mom is all about new business ventures. She is bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It will be something new next week.

She worries me. I hope she did not mortgage the house to fund this latest plan. And I hope that Bob - her new but much older husband - will watch her now that I am no longer here. He seems a lot more grounded than husband number three.

'How are you with you, Naddalin?'

For a moment, I hesitate and have all of Mom's attention.

'I'm fine.'

'Naddalin Have you met anyone? Wow... how does she do that? The excitement in his voice is palpable.

'No, mom, it is okay. You will be the first to know if I do.'

'Naddalin, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me.'

'Mom, I am fine. How's Bob?' As always, distraction is the best policy.

Later that evening, I called Raymond, my stepfather, mom's husband number two, the man I consider my dad, and the man I am named after. It is a brief conversation. It is not so much a conversation as it is a one-sided series of growls in response to my gentle coaxing. Ray is not a talker. But he is still alive, he still watches football on TV and goes bowling and fly fishing or making furniture when he is not. Raymond is a skilled carpenter and the reason I know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw. Everything is fine with him.

Friday night, Maury and I are debating what to do with our night - we want some time away from our studies, our work, and the student papers - when the doorbell rings.

Standing at our door is my good friend, Sam, holding a bottle of champagne.

'Sam! Nice to see you!' I give him a quick hug. 'Come in.'

Sam is the first person I met when I arrived at OVHS looking as lost and alone as I was.

We recognized a soul mate in each of us those days and have been friends ever since.

Not only do we share a good sense of humor, but we found out that Raymond and Sam Senior were together in the same military unit. As a result, our fathers also became strong friends.

Sam is studying engineering and is the first in his family to attend college. He is damn brilliant, but his real passion is photography. Sam's eye for a good photo.

'I have news.' He smiles, his dark eyes twinkling.

'Don't tell me - you've been, he made it to not get kicked out for another week,' I tease, and he scowls playfully at me.

'The Pittsburgh Place Gallery will be exhibiting my photos next month.'

'It's amazing - congratulations!' Delighted for him, I hug him again. Maury also shines.

'Well done, Sam! I should put this in the newspaper. Nothing like last minute editorial changes on a Friday night.' She smiles.

'Let us celebrate. I want you to come to the opening.' Sam looks at me intently. I rinse.

'You two, of course,' he adds, giving Maury a nervous look.

Sam and I are good friends, but I know deep down that he would like to be more. He is cute and funny, but he is just not for me. He is more like the brother I have ever had. Maury often teases me that I miss the boyfriend needed gene, but the truth is I have not just met anyone who... well, who I am drawn to, even though a part of me longs for those. trembling knees, heart in my mouth, butterflies in my stomach, sleepless nights.

Sometimes, I wonder if there is something wrong with me. I have spent too much time in the company of my romantic literary heroes, and therefore my ideals and expectations are far too high. But in reality, no one has ever made me feel that way.

Until very recently, the annoying little voice of my subconscious whispered.

NO! I banish the thought immediately. I am not going, not after this painful interview. Are you gay, Mr. Maury, I scowl at the memory? I know I have dreamed about him most nights since, but it is just to purge the terrible experience from my system, surely?

I watch Sam open the bottle of champagne. He is tall, and in his jeans and t-shirt, he has shoulders and muscles, tanned skin, black hair, and burning black eyes.

Yes, Sam is hot, but he finally gets the message: we are just friends. The cork makes a loud noise, and Sam looks up and smiles.

Saturday at the store is a nightmare. We are besieged by repair people who want to beautify their homes. Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood, John, and Patrick - the other two part-time employees- and I are all rushed. But there is a lull around lunchtime, and Mrs. Eastwood asks me to check some orders while I sit behind the counter at the checkout discreetly eating my bagel. I am engrossed in the task, checking the catalog numbers against the items we need and the items we have ordered, my eyes moving from the order book to the computer screen and back as I check that the entries match. Then, for some reason, I look up... and find myself locked in the gray, daring gaze of Grayson Maury who is standing at the counter and watching me intently.

Heart failure.

'Miss Black. What a pleasant surprise.' His gaze is unwavering and intense.

Holy shit. What is he doing here with all the tousled hair and the outdoors in his cream chunky knit sweater, jeans, and walking boots? I think my mouth has opened and I cannot locate my brain or voice.

'Mr. Maury,' I whisper because that is all I can do. There is a smile ghost on his lips and his eyes shine with humor like he is enjoying a private joke.

'I was in the area,' he says in explanation. 'I need to stock up on a few things.'

It is good to see you again, Miss Black. Her voice is warm and hoarse like melted chocolate caramel... or something like that.

I shake my head to come to my senses. My heart beats a frenetic tattoo, and for some reason, I blushed furiously under its constant scrutiny. I am completely bowled over by the sight of him standing in front of me. My memories of him did not do him justice. He is not just handsome - he is the epitome of male beauty, breathtaking, and he is here. Here in the Eastwood hardware store. Go figure it out. Finally, my cognitive functions are restored and reconnected with the rest of my body.

'Naddalin. My name is Naddalin,' I mumble. 'How can I help you, Mr. Maury?'

He smiles, and again, it is like he knows a big secret. It is so confusing. Taking a deep breath, I put on the professional facade that I have worked in this shop for years. I can do it.

'There are a few items that I need. For starters, I would like some cable ties,' he murmurs, his gray eyes cold but amused.

Cable ties?

'We have several lengths in stock. Shall I show you?' I whisper, my voice is soft and hesitant.

Catch yourself, Black. A slight frown shakes Maury's charming forehead.

'Please. Show the way, Miss Black,' he said. I try to be nonchalant as I step out from behind the counter, but I focus on not falling over my own feet - my legs are suddenly the consistency of Jell-O. I am so glad I decided to wear my best jeans this morning.

'They're with the electrical appliances, aisle eight.' My voice is a little too bright. I look at it and regret it almost immediately. Damn, he is handsome. I am blushing.

'After you,' he whispers, gesturing with his long-fingered, beautifully manicured hand. With my heart nearly choking - because it is in my throat trying to escape my mouth - I walk down one of the aisles to the electrical section. Why is he in Pittsburgh?

Why is he here at Eastwood's? And from a tiny, underused part of my brain - located at the base of my elongated marrow where my subconscious resides - comes the thought: it is here to see you. Certainly not! I rejected it immediately. Why would this handsome, powerful, and courteous man want to see me? The idea is absurd, and I throw it out of my head.

'Are you in Pittsburgh on business?' I ask, and my voice is too loud like my finger is stuck in a door or something. Thin! Try to be cool Naddalin!

'I was visiting the agricultural division of the OVHS. She is based in York. I am currently funding research there in crop rotation and soil science,' he said neutrally. See?

Not at all there to find you, my subconscious laughs at me, strong, proud, and sulky. I blush at my crazy, capricious thoughts.

'Is this all part of your Feed the World plan?' I am teasing.

'Something like that,' he admits, and his lips curl up in a half-smile.

He is looking at the selection of cable ties we stock at Eastwood. What is he going to do with those? I cannot imagine him as a repair person at all. His fingers trail through the various packages displayed, and for some inexplicable reason, I must look away. He leans over and selects a package.

'These will do,' he said with his secret smile, and I blushed.

'Is there anything else?'

'I would like duct tape.'

Masking tape?

'Are you redecorating?' The words got out before I could stop them. Surely, he hires workers or has staff to help him decorate?

'No, no redecorating,' he said quickly then smirked, and I have the strange feeling that he is laughing at me.

Am I as funny as I am funny?

'Over here,' I whispered in embarrassment. 'The masking tape is in the decor aisle.'

I look behind me as he follows him.

'Have you worked here for a long time?' His voice is low, and he looks at me, gray eyes focused. I blush even more vividly. Why does he have this effect on me?

I feel like I am fourteen - left, as always, and out of place. Eyes before Black!

'Four years,' I mumble as we reach our goal. To distract me, I lower my hand and select the two widths of masking tape we have in stock.

'I'll take that one,' Maury said quietly, gesturing to the larger strip, which I passed him.

Our fingers brush very briefly, and the current is there again, zapping through me as if I had touched a bare wire. I involuntarily gasp at the feeling, all the way to a dark, unexplored place deep in my stomach. Desperately, I seek my balance.

'Nothing else?' My voice is hoarse and panting. His eyes widened slightly.

'A little rope, I think.' His voice reflects mine, hoarse.

'This way.' I lower my head to hide my recurring blush and walk towards the aisle.

'What kind were you after? We have a synthetic and natural filament rope... twine... a cable...' I stop at his expression, his eyes darkening. Holy cow.

'I'll take five yards of the natural filament rope please.'

Quickly, fingers shaking, I measure five meters against the fixed ruler, aware that his gray, burning gaze is on me. I dare not look at him. Jeez, could I be more embarrassed as I pull my Stanley knife out of the back pocket of my jeans, cut it then roll it up neatly before tying it into a slip knot. Miraculously, I managed not to remove a finger with my knife. 'Were you a Girl Scout?' he asks, sculpted, sultry lips curled in amusement. Do not look at his mouth! 'Organized group activities are not my thing, Mr. Maury.

He arched an eyebrow. 'What's your thing, Naddalin?' he asks, his voice soft and his secret smile is back. I watch him unable to express myself. I am on moving tectonic plates. Try to be cool, Naddalin, my tortured subconscious begs on bent knees.

'Books,' I whisper, but inside my subconscious screams: You! You are my thing! I slap him instantly, mortified that my psyche has ideas above his station. 'What kind of books?' He tilts his head to one side. Why is he so interested? 'Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mostly.' He rubs his chin with his long index finger and thumb as he contemplates my response. Or he is bored and trying to hide it.

'Do you need anything else? I must leave this topic - those fingers on this face are so alluring. I do not know. What else would you recommend?' What would I recommend? I do not even know what you are doing. 'For a repair person?' He nods, gray eyes full of wicked humor. I blush and my eyes stray on their own to her tight jeans.

'Combination,' I reply and know that I no longer watch what comes out of my mouth. He raises an eyebrow, amused, once again. 'You wouldn't want to ruin your clothes,' I wave vaguely towards her jeans. 'I could always take them off.' He smiles. 'Uh.' I feel the color of my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of the Communist manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW. 'I will take combinations. God keep me from ruining my clothes,' he said dryly. I try to dismiss the unwelcome image of him without jeans. 'Do you need anything else?' I squeak as I hand him the blue jumpsuit.

He ignores my request. 'How's the article doing?' He finally asked me a normal question, far from all the innuendo and confusing double talk... a question I can answer. I grasp it firmly with both hands as if it were a life raft and opt for honesty. 'I do not write it, Maury is. Miss Smith. My roommate, she is the writer. She is incredibly happy about it. She is the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that she could not do the interview in person. I feel like I am getting some fresh air - well, a normal topic of conversation. Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photos of you.'

Maury raises an eyebrow. 'What kind of photographs does she want?' Okay. I had not taken this answer into account. I shake my head because I just do not know. 'Well, here I am. Tomorrow, maybe...' He pauses. 'Would you be ready to attend a photoshoot?' My voice cracks again. Maury will be in seventh heaven if I can pull it off. And you could see him again tomorrow, that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively to me. I dismiss the thought - of all the stupid, ridiculous... 'Maury will be delighted - if we can find a photographer.' I am so happy; I smile broadly at him. His lip's part, as if taking a deep breath, and he blinks. For a split second, it somehow seems lost, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position. Oh my. The lost gaze of Grayson Maury. 'Let me know for tomorrow.'

Slitting his hand in his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet. 'My card. It has my cell phone number on it. You will have to call before ten in the morning.' 'Okay.' I smile at him. Maury will be delighted. 'Naddalin! Paul materialized at the other end of the aisle. He is Mr. Eastwood's younger brother. I had heard that he had returned from Princeton, but I did not expect to see him today. 'Uh, excuse me for a second, Mr. Maury. Maury frowns as I turn away from him. Paul has always been a friend, and in this weird moment that I experience with Maury, a control freak, rich, powerful, and incredibly offbeat, it is great to talk to someone normal. Paul hugs me tightly, taking me by surprise.

'Naddalin, hi, it's so good to see you!' it gushes out. 'Hi Paul, how are you home for your brother's birthday?' 'Yes. You look good, Naddalin, good.' He smiles as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I drag myself from foot to foot, embarrassed. It is good to see Paul, but he has always been too familiar. When I look at Grayson Murray, he looks at us like a hawk, his hooded, speculative gray eyes, his mouth a hard, unmoved line. He went from being strangely attentive to someone else - someone cold and distant.

'Paul, I am with a client. Someone you should meet,' I said, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in Maury's eyes. I drag Paul to meet him, and they weigh each other. The atmosphere is suddenly arctic. 'Uh, Paul, this is Grayson Maury. Mr. Maury, this is Paul Eastwood. His brother owns the place.' And for some irrational reason, I feel like I must explain a little more. 'I have known Paul since working here, although we do not see each other often. He is back from Princeton studying business administration.' I am babbling... stop now! 'Mr. Eastwood. Grayson holds out his hand, his gaze was unreadable.

'Mr. Maury, 'Paul returned his handshake. 'Wait - not the Grayson Murray from Murray Enterprises Handling?' Paul goes from gruff to amazing in less than a nanosecond. Maury gives him a polite smile that does not reach his eyes. 'Wow - is there anything I can offer you?' 'Naddalin has it all covered, Mr. Eastwood. She was very attentive. His expression is deadpan, but his words... it is like he is saying something quite different. It is confusing. 'Cool,' Paul replies. 'Catch yourself later, Naddalin.' 'Of course, Paul. I watch him disappear towards the reserve. 'Is there anything else, Mr. Maury?' 'Just these items.'

His tone is muted and cold. Damn... I offended him by taking a deep breath, I turned around and walked over to the cash register. What is his problem? I call the rope, jumpsuit, masking tape, and cable ties at checkout. 'It will be forty-three dollars, please.' I am looking at Murray and wish I had not. He looks at me closely, his gray eyes intense and smoky. It is disconcerting. 'Would you like a bag?' I ask by taking his

credit card. 'Please, Naddalin. Her tongue caresses my name, and my heart is frantic again. I can hardly breathe.

In a hurry, I place his purchases in a plastic rack. 'Will you call me if you want me to do the photoshoot?' It is once again for business. I nod, again speechless, and give him back his credit card. 'Good. Until tomorrow maybe.' He turns to leave, then stops. 'Oh - and Naddalin, I'm glad Miss Smith couldn't do the interview.' He smiles, then walks out of the store with renewed purpose, slipping the plastic bag over his shoulder, leaving me with a shaking mass of raging female hormones. I spend several minutes staring at the closed door he just left before returning to planet Earth. All right - I like it.

There, I admitted it myself. I cannot hide from my feelings anymore. Photo, shootout this before. I find him attractive, incredibly attractive. But it is a lost cause, I know, and I sigh with bittersweet regret. It was just a coincidence that he came here. But still, I can admire it from afar, surely no harm can result from it. And if I find a photographer, I can do some serious admiration tomorrow. I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself smiling like a schoolchild. I need to phone Maury and set up a photo shoot.

Maury is ecstatic.

'But what was he doing at Eastwood's?' Her curiosity oozes through the phone. I am at the back of the storage room, trying to keep my voice relaxed.

'He was in the area.'

'It is a huge coincidence, Naddalin. Don't you think he was there to see you?' she speculates. My heart wavers at the prospect, but it is a short-lived joy. The drab and disappointing reality is that he was here on business.

'He was visiting the agricultural division of OVHS. He funds research,' I mumble.

'Oh yes. He gave the department a \$ 5.5 million grant.'

Wow.

'How do you know that?'

'Naddalin, I am a journalist, and I wrote a profile on the guy. It is my job to find out.'

'Alright, Carla Bernstein, keep your hair. So, you want these pictures?'

'Of course, I do. The question is who is going to do them and where.'

'We could ask him were. He says he is staying in the area.'

'Can you contact him?'

'I have his cell number.'

Maury gasps.

'The richest, most elusive and enigmatic bachelor in Washington State, just gave you his cell phone number.'

'Um yes.'

'Naddalin! He likes you. No doubt about it.' His tone is categorical.

'Maury, he's just trying to be nice.' But even when I say the words, I know they are not true.

- Grayson Maury is not doing well. He is polite. And a soft little voice whispers, Maury is right. My scalp itches at the thought that just maybe, he could love me. He said he was glad Maury did not do the interview. I hug in quiet glee, rocking side to side, thinking of the possibility of him liking me for a moment. Maury brings me back to the now.

'I do not know who we will be filming. Levi, our regular photographer, cannot.

He is at home in Idaho Falls for the weekend. leading entrepreneurs.'

'Hmm... What about Sam?'

'Great idea! Ask him - he will do anything for you. So, call Maury and find out where he wants us.' Maury is cavalier about Sam.

'I think you should call him.'

'Who, Sam? Maury laughs.

'No, Maury.

'Naddalin, you have the relationship.'

'Relationship?' I squeak at him, my voice rising several octaves. 'I barely know the guy.' 'At least you have met him,' she said bitterly. 'And it looks like he wants to get to know you better. Naddalin, call him,' she slams and hangs up. She is so bossy sometimes. I frown at my cell, sticking my tongue out.

I am just leaving a message for Sam when Paul walks into the storeroom looking for sandpaper.

'We're pretty busy over there, Naddalin,' he said without acrimony.

'Yes, uh, sorry,' I mumble, turning to leave.

'So how come you know Grayson Maury?' Paul's voice is unconvincingly nonchalant.

'I must have interviewed him for our student newspaper. Maury was not doing well.' I shrug, trying to look relaxed and not doing any better than him.

'Grayson Maury at Eastwood's. Go figure,' Paul growled in astonishment. He shakes his head as if to clear it up. 'Anyway, do you want a drink or something tonight?'

Every time he is home he asks me for a date, and I always say no. It is a ritual. I never considered it an innovative idea to date the boss's brother, and besides, Paul is cute as an all-American boy next door, but he is not a literary hero, not at all. imagination. Maury asks my subconscious, his eyebrow figuratively raised.

I slap her.

'Don't you have a family dinner or something for your brother?'

'It's tomorrow.'

'Another time, Paul. I need to study tonight. I have my finals next week.'

'Naddalin, one of these days you'll say yes,' he smirked as I escaped into the store.

'But I do places, Naddalin, not people,' Sam moaned.

'Sam, please? I beg you. Gripping my cell, I walk around the living room of our apartment, looking out the window at the fading evening light.

'Give me that phone.' Maury grabs the receiver from me, throwing her silky red, blonde hair over her shoulder.

'Listen here, Sam Rodriguez, if you want our newspaper to cover the opening of your show, will you do this shoot for us tomorrow, capiche?' Maury can be incredibly tough.

'Good. Naddalin will call you back with the time and place of the call. We will see you tomorrow.' She turns off my cell phone.

'Sorted out. All we need to do now is decide where and when. Call him.' She hands me the phone. My stomach twists.

'Call Maury now!'

I scowl at her and search my back pocket for her business card. I take a deep breath, and with trembling fingers, I dial the number.

He answers on the second ring. His tone is muted, calm, and cold.

'Maury.'

'Uh... Naddalin Black from Mr. Maury.' I do not recognize my voice; I am so nervous. There is a brief pause. Inside, I am shaking.

'Miss Black. It is nice to hear from you.' His voice has changed. He is surprised, I think, and he looks so... warm - even handsome. My breathing stops and I blush. I suddenly realize that Mary Smith is looking at me with his mouth open, and I rush into the kitchen to avoid his unwanted examination.

'Um - we would like to continue with the photoshoot for the article.' Breathe, Naddalin, breathe.

My lungs are dragging in a rushed breath. 'Tomorrow, if it is okay. Where would it suit you, sir?'

I can almost hear his sphinx smile through the phone.

'I am staying at the Heathman in Pittsburgh. Shall we say, nine-thirty tomorrow morning?' 'Okay, we will see you there. I am all gushing and panting - like a child, not a grown woman who can legally vote and drink in Washington state.

'I can't wait to be there, Miss Black.' I visualize the wicked glint in his gray eyes. How can he get seven little words to contain so many enticing promises that I hang up? Maury is in the kitchen, and she looks at me with a look of utter dismay on her face.

'Naddalin Rose Black. You like him! I have never seen or heard you, so... affected by anyone before. You blush.

'Oh Maury, you know I blush all the time. It is a professional risk with me. Do not be so ridiculous,' I crack. She blinks at me in surprise - I very rarely throw my toys out of the pram - and briefly give in. 'I just find him... intimidating, that's all.'

'Heathman, it figures,' Maury mumbles. 'I'll call them and negotiate a space for the shoot.'

'I am going to cook supper. Then I need to study.' I cannot hide my irritation with her as I open one of the cupboards to prepare supper.

I am restless that night, I turn around and turn around. Dreaming about smoky gray eyes, coveralls, long legs, long fingers, and dark and gloomy unexplored places. I wake up twice in the night, my heart is pounding. Oh, I am going to look great tomorrow with so little sleep, I am scolding myself. I hit my pillow and tried to settle down.

The Heathman is nestled in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh. Its impressive brownstone building was completed just in time for the crash of the late 1920s. Sam, Travis, and I are traveling in my Beetle, and Maury is in his CLK because we cannot all fit in my car. Travis is Sam's friend and gopher, here to help with the lighting. Maury arranged for me to acquire free use of a room at the Heathman for the morning in exchange for a credit in the article. When she explains to the front desk that we are here to photograph Grayson CEO Maury, we are instantly upgraded to a suit. Just a full-size suite, however, as apparently Mr. Maury already occupies the largest of the building. An overly enthusiastic marketing manager shows us the next step - he is young and extremely nervous for some reason.

I suspect it is Maury's beauty and imposing manner that disarms him shootout because he is putty in his hands. The rooms are elegant, sober, and richly furnished.

It is nine o'clock. We have half an hour to set up. Maury is booming,

'Sam, I think we're going to shoot that wall, are you okay?' She is not waiting for his answer. 'Travis, get rid of the chairs. Naddalin, could you ask housekeeping to bring some refreshments and let Maury know where we are.

Yes, head of household. She is so domineering. I roll my eyes but do as I am telling.

Half an hour later, Grayson Maury enters our suite.

Holy Crap! He wears a white shirt open at the collar and Maury flannel pants that hang from his hips. Her unruly hair is still damp from a shower. My mouth goes dry looking at him... he is so hot. Maury is followed next by a man in his thirties, all shaven and stubble in a dark suit and tie who stands silently in the corner. His hazel eyes gaze at us impassively.

'Miss Black, we meet again.' Maury reaches out and I squeeze it, blinking quickly.

Oh my... he is really, rather... wow. As I touch her hand, I am aware of this delicious current flowing through me, lighting up, making me blush, and I am sure my erratic breathing must be audible.

'Mr. Maury, this is Mary Smith,' I mumble, waving a hand at the coming Murray, looking him straight in the eye.

'The tenacious Miss Smith. How are you?' He gives her a small smile, looking amused. 'I hope you're feeling better, Naddalin said you weren't well last week.'

'I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Maury.' She squeezes his hand firmly without batting an eyelid.

I remember Maury going to the best private schools in Washington. Her family has money, and she grew up confident and sure of her place in the world. She does not take any shit. I am in awe of her.

'Thanks for taking the time to do this.' She gives him a polite and professional smile.

'It's a pleasure,' he replies, turning his gray gaze to me, and I blush again. Damn it.

'This is Sam Black, our photographer,' I said smiling at Sam who smiled affectionately at me. His eyes go cold as he looks from me to Maury.

'Mr. Maury,' he nods.

'Mr. Black,' Maury's expression also changes as he assesses Sam.

'Where do you want me to?' Maury asks him. His tone seems vaguely threatening. But Maury is not about to let Sam run the show.

'Mr. Maury - if you could sit here, please watch out for the light cables. And then we will do some standing as well.' She directs him to a chair leaning against the wall.

Travis turns on the lights, momentarily blinding Maury, and mumbles an apology.

Then Travis and I pull back and watch Sam start to pull away. He takes several pictures in his hand, asking Maury to turn in that direction, then that, to move his arm, then to put it back. Moving to the tripod, Sam picks up several more, while Maury sits and poses, patiently and naturally, for about twenty minutes. My wish has come true: I can stand and admire Maury from not so far away. Twice our eyes lock, and I must tear myself away from his cloudy gaze.

'Seated enough.' Maury enters again. 'Up, Mr. Maury?' she asks.

He gets up and Travis rushes over to remove the chair. Sam's Nikon shutter starts clicking again.

'I think we've had enough,' Sam announces five minutes later.

'Awesome,' Maury said. 'Thanks again, Mr. Maury. She shakes his hand, as does Sam.

'Can't wait to read the article, Miss Smith,' Maury mutters, and turns to me, standing by the door. 'Are you going to walk with me, Miss Black?' He asks.

'Of course,' I said, completely bowled over. I glanced anxiously at Murray, who shrugs. I notice Sam scowling behind her.

'Hello everyone,' Maury said as he opened the door, stepping aside to let me out first.

Holy shit... what the fuck does he want? I stop in the hallway of the hotel, stirring nervously as Maury exits the room, followed by Mr. Buzz-Cut in his pointy suit.

'I'll call you, Stephen,' he whispers to Buzz-Cut. Stephen returns to the hallway and Maury turns his gray, burning gaze to me. Damn... did I do something wrong?

'I wondered if you would join me for coffee this morning.'

My heart slams in my mouth. A date Grayson Maury asks me for a date. He asks you if you want a coffee. He thinks you have not woken up yet, my subconscious moaned at me again in a sneering mood. I clear my throat trying to control my nerves.

'I have to get everyone home,' I whisper, wringing my hands and fingers in front of me.

'STEPHEN,' he calls, making me jump. Stephen, who had retired into the hallway, turns, and walks towards us.

'Are they based at the university?' Maury asks, her voice soft and questioning. I nod, too stunned to speak.

'Stephen can take them. He is my driver. We have a big 4x4 here, so he can take the equipment as well.'

'Mr. Maury?' Stephen asks when he reaches us, giving nothing.

'Please can you bring the photographer, his assistant and Miss Smith home?'

'Certainly, sir,' Stephen replies.

'There. Now can you join me for a coffee?' Maury smiles like it is a done deal.

I frown at him.

'Um - Mr. Maury, uh - this is really... look, Stephen doesn't have to bring them home.' I take a brief coup d' eye to Stephen, who remains stoically impassive. 'I'll trade vehicles with Maury if you give me a moment.'

Maury smiled a dazzling, unguarded, natural, jagged, glorious smile. Oh my... and he opens the door to the suite so I can go inside. I walk around him to enter the room, finding Maury in deep discussion with Sam.

'Naddalin, he really loves you,' she said without any preamble. Sam looks at me with disapproval. 'But I don't trust him,' she adds. I raise my hand in the hope that she stops talking. Miraculously, she does.

'Maury, if you take the Beetle, can I take your car?'

'Why?'

'Grayson Maury asked me to have coffee with him.'

Her mouth opens. Murray speechless! I savor the moment. She grabs me by the arm and leads me into the bedroom which is next to the living room of the suite.

'Naddalin, there is something about him. His tone is full of warning. 'He's beautiful, I agree, but he is dangerous. Especially for someone like you.'

'What do you mean, someone like me?' I ask, offended.

'An innocent girl like you, Naddalin. You know what I mean,' she said, a little irritated. I rinse.

'Maury, it is just coffee. I am starting my exams this week, and I need to study, so I will not be long.'

She pursues her lips as if considering my request. Finally, she takes her car keys out of her pocket and hands them to me. I give him mine.

'I will see you later. Do not be long, or I will send search and rescue.'

'Thank you.' I hug her.

I step out of the suite to find Grayson Maury waiting, leaning against the wall, looking like a model in a pose for a shiny high-end magazine.

'All right, let us make some coffee,' I whisper, rinsing a beetroot.

He smiles.

'After you, Miss Black. He stands up straight, holding out his hand for me to start.

I push my way down the hall, my knees shaking, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart in my mouth pounding a dramatic irregular beat. I am going for coffee with Grayson Maury... and I hate coffee.

We walk together down the wide hallway of the hotel to the elevators. What should I tell him? My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about?

What do I have in common with him? Her soft and warm voice surprises me with my reverie.

'How long have you known Maury?'

Oh, easy questions to start with.

'Since our first year. She is a good friend.'

'Hmm,' he replies, without commitment. What is he thinking about?

At the elevators, he presses the call button and the bell rings almost immediately. The doors open, revealing a young couple in a passionate clinch inside. Surprised and embarrassed, they jump aside, staring guiltily in all directions except ours. Maury and I get on the elevator.

I find it hard to keep a straight face, so I look at the floor, feeling my cheeks turn pink. When I look at Maury through my lashes he has a hint of a smile on his lips, but it is extremely hard to tell. The young couple says nothing, and we go down to the first floor in embarrassed silence. We do not even have trashy background music to distract us.

The doors open and, to my surprise, Maury takes my hand and squeezes it with his long, cold fingers. I can feel the current flowing through me, and my already fast heartbeat quickens. As he leads me out of the elevator, we can hear the couple's suppressed laughter erupt behind us. Maury smiles.

'What is it for the elevators?' he mumbles.

We walk through the spacious and bustling lobby of the hotel towards the entrance, but Maury avoids the revolving door, and I wonder if that is because he should let go of my hand.

Outside, it is a mild Sunday in May. The sun is shining, and the traffic is light. Maury turns left and heads around the corner, where we stop to wait for the

crosswalk lights to change. He still holds my hand. I am on the street and Grayson Maury is holding my hand. No one has ever held my hand. I feel dizzy and sting all over the place. I try to stifle the ridiculous smile that threatens to split my face in two. Try to be cool, Naddalin, my subconscious is begging me. The green man appears, and we leave.

We walk four blocks before reaching the Pittsburgh Coffee House, where Maury frees me to hold the door open so I can enter.

'Why do not you pick a table while I get the drinks. What do you want?' he asks, polite as always.

'I'm going to have... uh - English breakfast tea, bag.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'No coffee?

'I do not like coffee.'

He smiles.

'Okay, take some tea. Sugar?'

For a moment, I am stunned, thinking it is an ailment, but luckily my subconscious between pursed lips. No, stupid - do you have sugar?

'No thanks.' I look at my knotted fingers.

'Something to eat?'

'No thanks.' I shake my head and he walks over to the counter.

I watch him surreptitiously under my lashes as he lines up waiting to be served. I could watch him all day... he is tall, wide, and thin, and the way those pants hang from his hips... Oh my gosh. Once or twice, he runs his long, Billie full fingers through her now dry but still messy hair. Hmm... I would like to do that. This thought spontaneously comes to my mind and my face ignites. I bite my lip and look at my hands again, not liking where my wayward thoughts are going.

'Penny for your thoughts?' Maury is back, surprising me.

I turn crimson. I was just thinking to run my fingers through your hair and wonder if it would be soft to the touch. I shake my head. He carries a tray which he places on the small round birch veneer table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot, and a side plate with a single tea bag titled 'Twinings English Breakfast' - my favorite. It has a coffee that has a beautiful leaf design imprinted in the milk. How do they do this? I walk around with folded arms. He also bought himself a blueberry muffin. Putting the tray aside, he sits down across from me and crosses his long legs. He looks so comfortable, so comfortable with his body, I envy him. Here I am, all disgusting and uncoordinated, barely able to get from A to B without falling face down.

'Your thoughts?' He invites me. 'It's my favorite tea.' My voice is calm, panting. I just cannot believe I am sitting across from Grayson Maury at a cafe in Pittsburgh. He frowns. He knows I am hiding something. I put the teabag in the teapot and fish it out almost immediately with my teaspoon. As I put the used tea bag back on the side plate, he tilted his head, looking at me questioningly. 'I like my weak black tea,' I mumble in explanation. 'I see. Is this your boyfriend?' Whoa... What is 'Who?' 'The photographer. Sam Black.' I laugh, nervous but curious. What gave him that impression? 'No. Sam is a good friend of mine, that is all. Why did you think he was my boyfriend?'

'The way you smiled at him, and him at you.' His gray gaze holds mine back. He is so annoying. I want to look away, but I am taken - bewitched. 'He's more like family,' I whisper. Maury nods slightly, pleased with my answer, and looks at his blueberry muffin. His long fingers deftly unhook the paper, and I watch, fascinated. 'Do you want some?' he asks, and that amused, secretive smile is back. 'No thanks.' I frown and look at my hands again. 'And the boy I met yesterday at the store. Isn't that your boyfriend? 'No. Paul is just a friend. I told you yesterday.' Oh, this is getting silly. 'Why do you ask?' You seem nervous around men. 'Holy shit, this is personal. I am just nervous around you, Maury.' I find you intimidating. 'I blush scarlet, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor and look at my hands again. I hear his strong breath.' You should find me intimidating, 'he nods.' You are very honest. Please do not look down.

I like to see your face. 'Oh. I look at him, and he gives me an encouraging but ironic smile.' That gives me clue to what you might be thinking, 'he huffed.' You are a mystery, Miss Black. Mysterious me? 'There is nothing mysterious about me.' 'You are very independent,' he whispers. Does I Wow... how do I handle this? It is disconcerting. Me, autonomous? Certainly not. 'Except when you are blushing, of course, which is often the case. I just wish I knew what you were blushing for. He puts a small piece of muffin in his mouth and begins to chew it slowly, not taking his eyes off me. And at the right time, I blush. Shit! 'Do you still make such personal observations?' 'I did not realize I was. Have I offended you? He looks surprised.

'No,' I answer honestly. 'Good.' 'But you are very bossy,' I counteract softly. He raises his eyebrows and, if I am not mistaken, he blushes slightly too. 'I'm used to going my way, Naddalin,' he whispers. 'In all things.' 'I do not doubt it. Why didn't you ask me to call you by your first name?' I am surprised by my daring. Why has this conversation become so serious? This is not going as I thought. I cannot believe I feel so antagonistic to him. It is like he is trying to warn me. 'The only people who use my first name are my family and a few close friends. That is how I like it.' Oh. He still has

not said, 'Call me Grayson.' He is a control freak, there is no other explanation, and part of me thinks it might have been better if Maury had interviewed him. Two control monsters together. Plus, of course, she is almost blonde - well, strawberry blond-haired person - like all the women in her office. And she is beautiful, my subconscious reminds me. I do not like the idea of Grayson and Maury. I take a sip of my tea and Maury eats another small piece of his muffin. 'Are you an only child?' He asks.

Whoa... he keeps changing direction. 'Yes.' 'Tell me about your parents.' Why does he want to know this? It is so boring. 'My mom lives in Georgia with her new husband Bob. My stepdad lives in Montesano.' 'Your father?' 'My father died when I was a baby.' 'I'm sorry,' he mumbles, and a thrilling troubled look crosses his face. 'I do not remember him. 'And your mother remarried?' I sniffled. 'You could say that.' He frowns. 'You don't give much, do you?' he said dryly, rubbing his chin as if he was thinking deeply. 'You are neither.' 'You've interviewed me once before, and I can remember some pretty probing questions then.' He gives me a smirk. Holy shit. He remembers the 'gay' question.

Once again, I am mortified. In the years to come, I know, I will need intensive therapy so that I do not feel embarrassed whenever I remember the moment. I start babbling about my mom - anything to block that memory. 'My mother is wonderful. She is an incurable romantic. She is currently on her fourth husband.' Grayson raises his eyebrows in surprise. 'I miss her,' I continue. 'She's got Bob now. I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her wacky plans do not go as planned.' I smile affectionately. I have not seen my mother for so long. Grayson watches me intently, taking occasional sips of his coffee. I really should not be looking at his mouth. It is troubling. Those lips. 'Do you get along well with your stepfather?'

'Sure. I grew up with him. He is the only father I know.' 'And how is he?' 'Raymond He's... taciturn. 'That's it?' Maury asks, surprised. I shrug my shoulders. What does this man expect from the story of my life? 'Taciturn like his daughter-in-law,' says Maury. I refrain from rolling my eyes at him. 'He enjoys football - European football in particular - and bowling, fly fishing, and furniture making. He is a carpenter. Ex-army.' I sigh. 'Did you live with him?' 'Yes. My mom met husband number three when I was fifteen. I stayed with Ray.' He frowns as if he does not understand. 'Didn't you want to live with your mother?' he asks. I am blushing. It is none of his business.

'My husband number three lived in Texas. My house was in Montesano. And... you know my mom just got married. I stop. My mom never talks about husband number three. Where is Maury going with this? It is none of his business. Two can play this game. 'Tell me about your parents,' I ask. He shrugs his shoulders. 'My father is a

lawyer; my mother is a pediatrician. They live in New York.' Oh... he had a rich education. And I wonder about a successful couple who adopt three children, and one of them turns into a handsome man who takes on the business world and conquers it on his own. What drove him to be like this His parents must be proud. 'What are your siblings doing?' 'Jack is under construction, and my little sister is in Paris studying cooking under the direction of a renowned French chef.' His eyes cloud with irritation. He does not want to talk about his family or himself. 'I hear that Paris is beautiful,' I whisper. Why doesn't he want to talk about his family? Is it because he was adopted? 'It is beautiful. Have you been?' he asks, his irritation forgotten. 'I have never left the Americas.' So now we come back to banalities. What is he hiding?

'Would you like to go?' 'In Paris?' I squeak. It threw me out - who would not want to go to Paris 'Of course,' I concede. 'But it is England that I would visit.' He tilts his head to one side, running his index finger over his lower lip... oh my there. 'Because?' I blink quickly. Concentrate, Black. 'This is the home of Shakespeare, Austen, the Bronte Sisters, Thomas Hardy. I would love to see the places that inspired these people to author such wonderful books. All this great literary talk reminds me that I should study. I am looking at my watch. 'I had better go. I must study.' 'For your exams?' 'Yes. They start on Tuesday.' 'Where's Miss Smith's car?' 'In the hotel parking lot.' 'I'll take you home.' 'Thanks for the tea, Mr. Maury.' He smiles strangely. I have a huge secret smile. 'You're welcome, Naddalin. With pleasure. Come on,' he orders and holds out his hand to me. I take it, puzzled, and follow it out of the cafe. We walk back to the hotel, and I would like to say that it is in pleasant silence. He at least looks like his usual calm and calm. As for me, I try desperately to gauge the progress of our little morning coffee. I feel like I have been interviewed for a job, but I am not sure what it is. 'Are you still wearing jeans?' He asks unexpectedly.

'Most.' He nods. We are back at the intersection in front of the hotel. My mind is spinning. What a strange question... And I realize that our time together is limited. That is it. That was it, and I blew it out completely, I know. He has someone. 'Do you have a girlfriend?' I let go. Holy shit - Did I just say that aloud? His lips curl up in a half-smile and he looks at me. 'No, Naddalin. I do not do the girlfriend thing,' he said softly.

Oh... what does that mean He's not gay Oh, he is - shit! He must have lied to me during his interview. And for a moment, I think he will go on with an explanation, a clue to that cryptic statement - but he does not. I must go. I must try to collect my thoughts. I must get away from him. I walk forward and stumble, stumbling headlong on the road. 'Shit, Naddalin! Maury is crying. He pulls the hand he is holding so tight that I fall back against him just as a cyclist passes, narrowly missing me,

heading the wrong way down that one-way street. It all happens so fast - one minute I am falling, the second I am in his arms, and he is holding me tight to his chest.

I breathe in its clean and vital scent. It smells of freshly washed laundry and expensive shower gel. Oh my God, it is intoxicating. I take a deep breath. 'Are you OK?' he whispers. He has one arm around me, hugging me tightly, while the fingers of his other hand gently trace my face, probing me, examining me. His thumb brushes my lower lip and I hear his heavy breathing. He looks me in the eye, and I hold his anxious, burning gaze for a while or it is forever... but eventually my attention is drawn to his beautiful mouth. Oh my. And for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed. I want to feel his mouth on me.

Kiss me fucking! I implore him, but I cannot move. I am paralyzed by a strange, unknown urge, completely captivated by it. I gaze at Grayson Maury's exquisitely sculpted mouth, mesmerized, and he stares at me, his eyes clouded, his eyes dark. He is breathing harder than usual, and I have completely stopped breathing. I am in your arms.

Kiss me, please. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and gives me a little nod as if to answer my silent question. When he opens his eyes again, it is with a new purpose, a resolution of steel.

'Naddalin, you should get away from me. I am not the man for you,' he whispers.

What does it come from? Surely, I should be the judge. I frown and my head swims with rejection.

'Breathe, Naddalin, breathe. I am going to get up and let you go,' he said softly, and he gently pushes me away.

Adrenaline rushed through my body, from the near crash with the cyclist or the intoxicating proximity to Grayson, leaving me wired and weak. NO! My psyche screams as he walks away, leaving me private. He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length, carefully watching my reactions. And the only thing I can think of is that I wanted to be kissed, I made it pretty darn obvious, and he did not. He does not want me. He does not want me. I royally screwed up the coffee in the morning.

'I have this,' I breathe, finding my voice. 'Thank you,' I whispered in humiliation. How could I have misinterpreted the situation between us so completely that I need to get away from him?

'Why?' he frowns. He did not take my hands off.

'For saving me,' I whisper.

'That idiot was driving the wrong way. I am glad to be here. I shudder at the thought of what could have happened to you. Do you want to come and sit at the hotel for a while? He releases me, his hands by his side, and I stand in front of him, feeling like a fool.

With a shake, I clear my head. I just want to go. All my vague and unexpressed hopes have been dashed. He does not want me. What was I thinking? I scolded myself. What would Grayson Maury want from you? My subconscious is laughing at me. I wrap my arms around me and turn to face the road and find with relief that the green man has appeared. I make my way quickly, aware that Maury is behind me. Outside the hotel, I turn briefly to face him but cannot look him in the eye.

'Thanks for the tea and the photoshoot,' I whisper.

'Naddalin... I...' He stops, and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, so I look at him unwittingly. His gray eyes are dark as he runs his hand through his hair.

He looks torn, frustrated, his expression austere, all his careful control has evaporated.

'What, Grayson? I crack in irritation after he says - nothing. I just want to go. I must take away my fragile, hurt pride, and heal it somehow.'

'Good luck with your exams,' he whispers.

Therefore, he looks so sorry This is the big send-off Just to wish me luck in my exams.

'Thank you.' I cannot hide the sarcasm in my voice. 'Goodbye, Mr. Maury. I turn on my heel, vaguely surprised not to stumble, and without giving him a second look, I disappear down the sidewalk toward the underground garage.

Once under the dark, cold concrete of the garage with its dark fluorescent light, I lean against the wall and put my head in my hands. What I was thinking Unintentional and unwelcome tears flowed into my eyes. Why am I crying? I fall to the ground, angry with myself for this insane reaction. Raising my knees, I fold in on myself. I want to make myself as small as possible. This insane pain will be all the weaker the smaller I am.

As I placed my head on my knees, I let out unrestrained irrational tears. I cry because of the loss of something that I never had. It is ridiculous. Cry something that never was - my hopes dashed, my dreams dashed, and my expectations soared.

I have never been the victim of rejection. Ok... so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball - but I got that - running and doing something else at the same time as bouncing or throwing a bullet is not my thing. I am a serious responsibility in any sports field.

Romantically, however, I never got out, ever. A life of insecurity- I am too pale, too thin, too scruffy, uncoordinated, my extensive list of faults continues. So, I was always the one who turned away all the admirers. There was this guy in my chemistry class who loved me, but nobody ever sparked my interest - nobody but Grayson fucking Maury. I should be nicer to Paul Eastwood and Sam Black, although I am sure neither of them was found sobbing alone in dark places.

I just need a good scream.

Stop! Stop now! - My subconscious screams at me metaphorically, arms crossed, leaning on one leg, and patting his foot in frustration. Get in the car, go home, study. Forget about him... Now! And stop all this shit wallowing in on itself.

I take a deep breath and stand up. Get it together Black. I walk over to Maury's car, wiping the tears from my face as I do. I will not think about him anymore. I can just attribute this incident to the experience and focus on my exams.

Maury is sitting at the dining table in front of her laptop when I arrive. Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me.

'Naddalin, what's wrong?'

Oh no... not the Mary Smith inquisition. I shake my head at her, stepping back now in Smith's fashion - but I might as well be dealing with a blind, deaf-mute.

'You cried', she has an exceptional gift for sometimes saying the obvious. 'What did that bastard do to you?' she growls, and her face - jeez, she scares.

'Nothing Maury. This is the problem. This thought brings a wry smile to my face. 'So why did you cry? You never cry,' she said, her voice softening. She stands up, her green eyes full of concern. She puts her arms around me and hugs me.

I need to say something just to make her back down.

'I almost got hit by a cyclist.' It is the best I can do, but it distracts her momentarily from... him.

'Fuck Naddalin - are you ok, have you been hurt?' She holds me at arm's length and gives me a quick visual examination.

'No. Grayson saved me,' I whisper. 'But I was pretty shaken up.'

'I am not surprised. How was the coffee? I know you hate coffee.'

'I had tea. It was fine, nothing to report really. I do not know why he asked me.'

'He likes you Naddalin.' She drops her arms.

'Not anymore. I will not see him again.' Yeah, I am doing it to sound like a fact.

'Oh?'

Shit. She is intrigued. I head for the kitchen so she cannot see my face.

'Yes... he is a little out of my league Maury,' I said as dryly as I could, I do.

'What do you mean?'

'Oh Murr, that is obvious. I turn around and face her as she stands at the kitchen door, 'Not mine,' she says. 'Okay, he has more money than you, but then he has more money than most Americans!'

'Maury, he's -' I shrug.

'Naddalin! For heaven's sake - how many times do I have to tell you that you are a total girl,' she interrupts me. Oh no. She left for this tirade.

'Maury, please. I need to study.' I interrupted her. She frowns.

'Do you want to see the article? It is over. Sam took some great pictures.'

Do I need a visual reminder of the beautiful Grayson I do not want you to marry?

'Sure,' I marvel at a smile on my face and walk over to the laptop. And there he is, looking at me in black and white, looking at me and finding me missing.

I pretend to read the article, meeting his gray, staring gaze all the time, searching the photo for a clue as to why he is not the man for me - his own words for me. And it is suddenly, blindingly obvious. He is too beautiful. We are the opposite of two hugely different worlds. I have a vision of myself as Icarus flying too close to the sun and crashing and burning as a result. His words make sense. He is not the man for me.

That is what he meant, and it makes his rejection easier to accept.... I can live with it. I understand.

'Alright Murray,' I do. 'I will study.' I am not going to think about him for now, I swear to myself, and opening my review notes, I start reading.

It is only when I am in bed, trying to sleep, that I let my thoughts drift into my strange morning. I keep coming back to the quote `` I do not do the girlfriend thing,' and I am angry that I did not jump on that information sooner, while I was hugging him mentally begging him of all the fibers of my being. kiss Me. He had said it on the spot. He did not want me as a girlfriend. I turn to my side. Lazily, I wonder if he might be single, I close my eyes and start to drift. He runs away. Well not for you, my sleeping subconscious has one last blow on me before lashing out on my dreams.

-And-

That night I dream of gray eyes, leafy patterns in the milk, and I run in dark places with weird strip lighting, and I do not know if I am running to something or if I am moving away... not clear.

I put my pen down. Finished. My final exam is over. The Cheshire Cat's smile spread across my face. This is the first time this week that I smile. It is Friday,

and we are going to celebrate tonight, really celebrate. I might even get drunk! I have never been drunk before. I look at Murray across the gym, and she is still scribbling furiously, five minutes before the end. This is the end of my university career. I will never have to sit in rows of anxious and isolated students again. Inside, I make Billie full cartwheels around my head, knowing full well that this is the only place I can make Billie full cartwheels. Maury stops writing and puts down his pen. She looks at me and I catch her Cheshire cat smile as well.

We return together to our apartment in his Mercedes, refusing to discuss our last article. Maury is more concerned with what she is going to wear at the bar tonight. I am actively looking for my keys in my purse.

'Naddalin, there is a package for you.' Maury stands on the steps to the front door and holds a brown paper package. Odd. I have not ordered anything from Amazon recently.

Maury gives me the package and takes my keys to open the front door. It is addressed to Miss Naddalin Black. There is no sender's address or name. It is my mom or Ray.

'It's probably from my parents.'

'Open it!' Maury is excited as she heads to the kitchen for our 'exams are over hurray Champagne'.

I open the package and find inside a half-leather box containing three old books covered with identical fabric in new condition and a plain white card. On one side, in black ink with neat cursive writing, it is:

I recognize the quote from Tess. I am stunned by the irony as I just spent three hours writing about Thomas Hardy's novels on my final exam. There is no irony... it is on purpose. I thoroughly inspect the books, three volumes of Tess des D'Urbervilles. I open the front cover. Written in an old typeface on the faceplate is:

'London: Jack R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co, 1891.'

Holy shit - these are the first editions. They must be worth a fortune, and I immediately know who sent them. Maury is on my shoulder looking at the books. She takes the card.

'First editions,' I whisper.

'No.' Maury's eyes are wide in disbelief. 'Maury?

I agree.

'I can't think of anyone else.'

'What does this card mean?'

'I have no idea. That is a warning - honestly, it keeps warning me. I do not know why. It is not like I am banging on his door. I frown.'

'I know you don't want to talk about him, Naddalin, but he seriously loves you.' Warnings or not.

I did not let myself dwell on Grayson Murray last week. Okay... so his gray eyes still haunt my dreams, and I know it will take forever to erase the feel of his arms around me and his wonderful scent from my brain. Why did he send me this?

He told me that I was not for him.

'I found a first edition of Tess on sale in New York for \$ 14,000. But yours looks much better. They must have cost more.' Maury consults his good friend Google.

'This quote - Tess told her mother after Alec D'Urberville had his bad way with her.'

'I know,' Maury said. 'What is he trying to say?'

'I do not know, and I do not care. I cannot accept them from him. I will send them back with an equally puzzling quote from an obscure part of the book.'

'The little where Angel Clare says is going?' Maury asks with a completely straight face.

'Yes, this little.' I laugh. I love Maury, she is so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Maury hands me a glass of champagne.

'At the end of the exams and our new life in New York,' she smiles.

'Until the end of the exams, our new life in New York and remarkable results.' We drink and drink.

The bar is noisy and bustling, full of graduates soon to come out to be ransacked. Sam joins us. He will not graduate for another year, but he is in the mood to party and puts us in the spirit of our newfound freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for all of us. As I am doing my fifth, I know it is not an innovative idea besides champagne.

'What now, Naddalin?' Sam yells at me because of the noise.

'Maury and I are moving to New York. Maury's parents bought a condominium there for her.'

'Dios mio, how the other half lives. But you will be back for my show.'

'Of course, Sam, I wouldn't miss that for the world.' I smile, and he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me closer.

'It means a lot to me that you're here Naddalin,' he whispers in my ear.
'Another margarita?'

'Sam Lewis Black - are you trying to get me drunk? Because it works.'

I laugh. 'I think I had better get a beer. I will get us a pitcher.'

'No more drink, Naddalin!' Maury bellows.

Maury has the constitution of an ox. Her arm is draped over Levi, one of our English comrades and her usual photographer in her student newspaper. He has given up taking pictures of the drunkenness that surrounds him. He only has eyes for Maury. She is the tiny tank top, skinny jeans, and high heels, hair stacked with tendrils that hang softly around her face, her usual stunning body. Me, I am more of a Converse and t-shirt girl, but I wear my most flattering jeans. I step out of Sam's hold and get up from our table. Whoa. Headpin. I must grab the back of the chair. Tequila cocktails are not a promising idea.

I walk over to the bar and decide I should visit the powder room while I am standing. Happy thinking, Naddalin. I stagger in the crowd. Of course, there is a line, but at least it is calm and cool in the hallway. I take my cell phone to relieve the boredom of waiting in line. Hmm... Who did I call the last time? Was it Sam? Before that, a number that I do not recognize. Oh yes. Maury, that is his number. I laugh. I have no idea what time I am going to wake him up. He can tell me why he sent me these books and the cryptic message. If he wants me to stay away, he should leave me alone. I suppressed a drunken smile and hit automatic redial. He answers on the second ring.

'Naddalin? He is surprised to hear me. Well, frankly, I am surprised to call him.

Then my confused brain registers... how does it know it is me?

'Why did you send me the books?' I insult him.

'Naddalin, you are fine, you look strange. Her voice is full of concern.

'I am not the strange one, you are,' I accuse. There - that told him, my fortitude fueled by alcohol.

'Naddalin, have you been drinking?

'What is this for you?'

'I am - curious. Where are you?'

'In a bar.'

'What bar? He looks exasperated.'

'A bar in Pittsburgh.'

'How do you get home?'

'I'll find a way.' This conversation is not going as I expected.

'Which bar are you in?'

'Why did you send me the books, Grayson?'

'Naddalin, where are you, tell me now.' His tone is so, so dictatorial, his usual control freak. I imagine him as a former film director wearing jodhpurs, an old-fashioned megaphone, and a riding crop. The image makes me laugh aloud.

'You are so... domineering,' I laugh.

'Naddalin, then help me, where the fuck are you?'

Grayson Maury swears to me. I am still laughing. 'I am in Pittsburgh... I am far from New York.'

'Where in Pittsburgh?'

'Good night, Grayson.'

'Naddalin!'

I am hanging up. Ha! Although he had not told me about the books. I frown. Mission not accomplished. I am drunk - my head swims uncomfortably as I drag with the line. Well, the point of the exercise was to get drunk. I have succeeded. It is - not an experiment to repeat. The line has moved and now it is my turn. I look blankly at the poster on the back of the bathroom door which advocates the virtues of safe sex. Holy shit did I just call Grayson Maury the Shit. My phone rings and it makes me jump. I scream in surprise.

'Hi,' I bleat shyly into the phone. I had not counted on it.

'I'm coming to get you,' he said, hanging up. Only Grayson Maury could seem so calm and threatening at the same time.

Holy shit. I pull up my jeans. My heart is beating. Coming to get me Oh no. I am going to be sick... no... I am fine. Wait. It disturbs my head. I did not tell him where I was. He cannot find me here. Besides, it will take him hours to get here from New York, and we will be long gone. I wash my hands and look at my face in the mirror.

I look red and slightly blurry. Hmm... tequila.

I wait at the bar for what feels like forever for the pitcher of beer and finally return to the table.

'You've been gone for so long.' Maury scolds me. 'Where have you been?'

'I was in line for the bathroom.'

Sam and To Have a heated debate over our local baseball team. Sam stops in his tirade to serve us all the beers, and I take a long sip.

'Maury, I better get out there and get some fresh air.'

'Naddalin, you are so light.'

'I will be five minutes.'

I push my way through the crowd again. I am starting to feel nauseous, my head is spinning uncomfortably, and I am a little unsteady on my feet. More unstable than usual.

Drinking in the cool evening air in the parking lot makes me realize how drunk I am.

My vision has been affected and I see the double of everything, like in old reruns of Tom and Jerry Cartoons. I think I will be sick. Why did I let myself screw up?

'Naddalin,' Sam joined me. 'It's, okay?'

'I just drank a little too much.' I smile weakly at him.

'Me too,' he whispers, and his dark eyes watch me intently. 'Do you need a helping hand?' he asks and walks over, wrapping his arm around me.

'Sam, I am fine. I have this.' I try to push him away weakly.

'Naddalin, please,' he whispers, and now he is holding me in his arms, pulling me closer.

'Sam, what are you doing?'

'You know I love you Naddalin, please.' He has one hand on my lower back that holds me against him, the other on his chin that rocks my head back. Holy shit... he is going to kiss me. 'No Sam, stop - no.' I am pushing it, but it is a hard wall of muscle, and I cannot move it.

His hand has crept through my hair, and he holds my head in place.

'Please, Naddalin, curry?' A, 'he whispers against my lips. His breath is sweet and smells too sweet - of margarita and beer. He gently trails kisses down my jaw to the side of my mouth. I feel panicked, drunk, and out of control. The sensation is suffocating.

'Sam, no,' I plead. I do not want that. You are my friend and I think I will throw up. 'The lady said no.' A voice in the dark said softly. Holy shit! Grayson Maury is here. How Sam frees me.

'Maury,' he said laconically. I look at Grayson with concern. He looks at Sam and he is furious. Shit. My stomach goes up and I double, my body cannot take alcohol anymore, and I vomit dramatically on the floor.

'Ugh - Dios mio, Naddalin!' Sam jumps back in disgust. Maury grabs my hair, pulls it out of the firing line, and leads me gently to a raised flower bed at the edge of the parking lot. I note, with deep gratitude, that it is in relative darkness.

'If you're going to throw up again, do it here.' I will hold you. He has one arm around my shoulders - the other holds my hair in a makeshift ponytail along my back, so it is out of my face. I clumsily try to push him away, but I throw up again... and again. Oh shit...

How long will this last? Even when my stomach is empty and nothing is coming back, horrible dry jerks attack my body. I silently swear I will never drink again. It is too appalling for words. Finally, it stops.

My hands are resting on the brick wall of the flower bed, barely standing up - throwing up profusely is exhausting. Maury takes my hands away and hands me a handkerchief.

Only he would have a monogrammed linen handkerchief, freshly washed. CTG. I did not know you could still buy them. I vaguely wonder what the T represents when I wipe my mouth. I cannot bring myself to look at it. I am overwhelmed with shame, disgusted with myself. I want to be swallowed up by the azaleas in the flower bed and be somewhere other than here. Sam is still hovering over the entrance to the bar, watching us. I moan and put my head in my hands. It must be the worst time of my life. My head is still swimming as I try to remember a worse one - and I can only find Grayson's rejection - and so it is, so many darker shades in terms of humiliation. I risk a glance at him. He looks at me, his face calm, without saying anything. Turning around, I look at Sam who looks quite ashamed and, like me, intimidated by Maury. I stare at him. I have a few choice words for my so-called friend, which I cannot repeat in front of the CEO of Grayson Murray.

Naddalin, you are kidding, he just saw you throwing yourself around and in the local flora. There is no disguise for your lack of distinguished demeanor. 'I'm going to be wrong... inside,' Sam mumbles, but we both ignore him, and he slips into the building. I am alone with Maury. Double shit. What should I tell him? Sorry for the phone call. 'I'm sorry,' I mumble, staring at the handkerchief that I fret furiously with my fingers. That is so sweet. 'What are you sorry for Naddalin?' Oh shit, he wants his fucking pound of flesh. 'The phone call is mostly, being sick. Oh, the list goes on and on,' I whisper, feeling my skin color. Please can I die now? 'We've all been here, maybe not as dramatically as you are,' he said dryly. 'It is about knowing your limits, Naddalin. I mean, I am all for pushing the limits, but it is beyond the pale. My head is buzzing with excess alcohol and irritation. What does that have to do with him, I did not invite him here. He looks like a middle-aged man scolding me like a stray child. Part of me means that if I want to get drunk every night like this, it is my decision and nothing to do with it - but I am not brave enough.'

Not now that I threw up in front of him. Why is he still there? 'No,' I said contritely. 'I've never been drunk before and right now I don't want to be drunk again.' I just do not understand why he is here. I am starting to feel weak. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and pulls me into his arms, holding me to his chest like a child. 'Come on, I'll take you home,' he whispers. 'I need to tell Maury that. Saint Moses, I am again in his arms. 'My brother can tell him.' 'What?' 'My brother Jack is talking to Miss Smith.' 'Oh?' I do not understand. 'He was with me when you called.'

'At New York? I am confused. 'No, I'm staying at the Heathman.' Yet why? 'How did you find me?'

'I tracked your cell phone Naddalin.' Oh, sure he did. How is it possible? Is this legal Stalker, my subconscious whispers to me through the cloud of tequila still floating in my brain, but somehow, because it is him, I do not mind. 'Do you have a jacket or a handbag?' 'Um... yes, I came with the two. Grayson, please, I must tell Maury that. She is going to be worried.' His mouth presses into a hard line, and he sighs heavily. 'If you have to.' He puts me down and, taking my hand, leads me back to the bar. I feel weak, still drunk, embarrassed, exhausted, mortified, and at a strange level absolutely off the scale, elated. He shakes my hand - such a confusing array of emotions. I will need at least a week to process them all. It is loud, crowded and the music has started so there is a big crowd on the dance floor. Maury is not at our table and Sam is missing. Tom looks lost and desperate on his own. 'Where's Maury?' I yell at Tom over the noise. My head begins to hammer the bass line of the music in time. 'Dance,' Tomyells, and I can tell he is crazy. He eyed Grayson suspiciously. I struggle in my black jacket and place my little shoulder bag over my head so that it rests on my hip. I am good to go, once I see Maury. 'She's on the dance floor.'

I touch Grayson's arm and lean and scream into his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh scent. Oh my. All these forbidden and unfamiliar feelings that I tried to deny surface and unleash in my drained body. I blush, and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles contract deliciously. He rolls his eyes at me and takes my hand again and leads me to the bar. He served immediately, without waiting for Mr. Control-Freak Maury. Does everything come to him so easily? I do not hear what he is ordering. He hands me a very tall glass of ice water. 'Drink,' he shouts his order. The moving lights twist and turn to the beat of the music casting eerie colored lights and shadows all over the bar and patrons. He is alternately green, blue, white, and demonic red.

He looks at me intently. I take a temporary sip. 'All that,' he shouts. He is so bossy. He runs his hand through his unruly hair. He looks frustrated, angry. What is his problem? Apart from a silly drunk girl calling him in the middle of the night then he thinks she needs to be saved. And it turns out that she makes her friend in love. Then seeing her being violently ill at his feet. Oh, Naddalin... are you going to experience this one day? My subconscious figuratively silenced me and stared at me over its half-moon specs. I sway slightly and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. I do as I am told and drink the whole glass. It makes me uncomfortable. Taking the glass from me, he sets it on the bar. I notice through a blur what he is wearing, a loose white linen shirt, cozy jeans, black Converse sneakers, and a dark pinstripe jacket. His shirt is

unbuttoned at the top, and I see a pinch of hair in the gap. In my groggy state of mind, it looks delicious. He takes my hand once more.

Holy cow - he leads me on the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights, I can see his amused and slightly Naddalindonic smile. He holds out his hand to me and I am in his arms again, and he starts to move, taking me with him. Boy, he can dance, and I cannot believe I am taking it to step by step. It is because I am drunk that I can follow. He squeezes me tightly against him, his body against mine... if he were not squeezing me so tight, I am sure I would pass out at his feet. Deep inside me, my mother's oft-recited warning comes to me: Never trust a man who can dance. He takes us through the crowded crowd of dancers across the dance floor, and we are next to Maury and Jack, Grayson's brother. The music echoes, loud and suspicious, outside and inside my head. I gasp.

Maury makes her move. She dances her ass, and she only does that if she loves someone. Like someone. That means there will be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Maury! Grayson leans in and yells in Jack's ear. I cannot hear what he is saying. Jack is tall with broad shoulders, curly blond hair, and bright, wickedly bright eyes. I cannot tell the color under the pulsating heart of the flashing lights. Jack smiles and grabs Maury in his arms, where she is more than happy to be... Maury! Even in my drunken state, I am shocked. She just met him. She nods at everything Jack says and smiles at me and waves. Grayson propels us off the dance floor in double time. But I never got to talk to him. Is she okay? I can see where things are going for him and her. I need to lecture on safe sex. Deep down inside, I hope she is reading one of the posters on the back of the bathroom doors. My thoughts run through my brain, fighting the feeling of drunkenness and vagueness. It is so hot here, so strong, so colorful - too bright. My head starts to swim, oh no... and I can feel the ground rise to meet my face or that is what I feel. The last thing I hear before I pass out in Grayson Maury's arms is his harsh epithet. 'Shit!'

This is noticeably quiet. The light is stifled. I am comfortable and warm in this bed. Hmm... I open my eyes, and for a moment I am still and serene, enjoying the strange unfamiliar surroundings. I have no idea where I am. The headboard behind me is shaped like a massive sun. It is strangely familiar. The bedroom is large and airy and lavishly furnished in shades of brown and gold and beige. I have seen it before. Where my confused brain struggles through recent visual memories. Holy shit. I am at the Heathman hotel... in a suite. I stayed in a room like this with Maury. It looks bigger. Oh shit. I am in Grayson Maury's suite. How did I get here?

The fractured memories of the previous night slowly come back to haunt me. The drink, oh no the drink, the phone call, oh no the phone call, the vomiting, oh no the vomiting. Sam then Grayson. Oh no. I curl up inside. I do not remember coming here.

I am wearing my t-shirt, my bra, and my panties. No socks. No jeans. Holy shit.

I look at the bedside table. There is a glass of orange juice and two tablets. Advil.

Control monster that he is, he thinks of everything. I sit down and take the tablets. I do not feel that bad, a lot better than I deserve. Orange juice tastes divine.

It is thirst-quenching and refreshing. Nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice to revive an arid mouth.

Someone is knocking at the door. My heart leaps in my mouth and I cannot find my voice. He opens the door anyway and walks in.

Holy shit, he is training. He wears gray jogging pants that hang over his hips and a dark gray sweater like his hair. Grayson Maury's sweat, the notion does strange things to me. I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I feel like I am two, if I close my eyes, I am not there.

'Hello Naddalin. How are you feeling?'

Oh no.

'Better than I deserve,' I mumble.

I am watching him. He places a large shopping bag on a chair and grabs each end of the towel around his neck. He looks at me, dark gray eyes, and as usual, I have no idea what he is thinking. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well.

'How did I get here?' My voice is small, contrite.

He comes and sits on the edge of the bed. He is close enough for me to touch him, for me to smell. Oh my... sweat and shower gel and Grayson, that is an intoxicating cocktail - so much better than a margarita, and now I can speak from experience.

'Once you passed out, I didn't want to risk the leather upholstery of my car to take you to your apartment.' So, I brought you here, 'he said phlegmatically.

'Did you put me to bed?'

'Yes.' His face is impassive.

'Did I vomit again?' My voice is calmer.

'No.'

'Have you undressed me? I whisper.

'Yes.' He raised an eyebrow as I blushed furiously.

'We didn't,' I whisper, my mouth drying in mortified horror as I cannot answer the question. I look at my hands.

'Naddalin, you were in a coma. Necrophilia is not my thing. I love my sensitive and receptive women,' he says dryly.

'I am really sorry.'

Her mouth lifts slightly in a wry smile.

'It was a very entertaining evening. Not one that I will forget in a moment.'

Me neither - oh he is laughing at me, you bastard. I did not ask him to come to get me.

Somehow, I was made to feel like the villain of the room.

'You didn't have to end up with me with the James Bond stuff you developed for the highest bidder,' I told him dryly. He looks at me, surprised, and if I am not mistaken, a little hurt.

'First, the technology to track cell phones is available on the Internet. Second, my company does not invest or manufacture any type of surveillance device, and third, if I had not come to pick you up, you would wake up in the photographer's bed, and from what I remember, you were not too excited about him pushing his suit on,' he said acidly.

By pressing his costume! I look up at Grayson, he looks at me, his gray eyes blazing, saddened. I try to bite my lip, but I cannot suppress my laughter.

'What medieval chronicle have you escaped from? I laugh. 'You sound like a courteous knight.'

His mood visibly changes. Her eyes soften and her expression warms, and I see a trace of a smile on her beautifully crafted lips.

'Naddalin, I do not think so. Black knight. His smile is Naddalindonic and he shakes his head. 'Did you eat last night? His tone is accusing. I shake my head. What major transgression have I committed now? His jaw tightens, but his face remains impassive.

'You need to eat. That is why you were so sick. Honestly Naddalin, this is the number one drinking rule. He runs that hand through his hair, and I know it is because he is exasperated.

'Are you going to keep scolding me?'

'That's what I do?'

'I think so.'

'You're lucky I'm just scolding you.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, if you were mine you couldn't sit for a week after the bang you did yesterday.' You did not eat, you got drunk, you put yourself in danger. He closes his eyes, fear etched on his pretty face, and he shivers slightly. When he opens his eyes, he looks at me. 'I hate to think about what could have happened to you.'

I answer him with a scowl. What is his problem? What is it for him? If I was his... well, I am not. But a part of me would like to be. This thought pierces the irritation I feel at his bossy words. I blush at the quirk of my subconscious - she does her happy dance in a bright red hula skirt at the thought of being his.

'I would have been fine. I was with Maury.

'And the photographer? he yells at me.

Hmm... young Sam. I will need to face him at some point.

'Sam just got off the line.' I shrug my shoulders.

'Well, the next time he gets off the line, maybe someone should teach him manners.'

'You're quite the disciplinarian,' I hiss at him.

'Oh, Naddalin, you have no idea.' His eyes narrow, then he smiles nastily. It is disarming. One minute I am confused and angry, the next I am looking at her beautiful smile.

Wow... I am delighted, and that is because her smile is so rare. I completely forget what he is talking about.

'I am going to take a shower. Unless you want to shower first?' He tilts his head to one side, still smiling. My heart sped up and my elongated marrow neglected to trigger synapses to make me breathe. His smile widens, and he reaches out and runs his thumb over my cheek and my lower lip.

'Breath, Naddalin,' he whispers and stands up. 'Breakfast will be here in fifteen minutes.

You must be starving. 'He walks over to the bathroom and closes the door.

I let out the breath I am holding. Why is he so damn attractive? Right now, I want to go join him in the shower. I have never felt this for anyone. My hormones are raging. My skin tingled where his thumb passed over my face and lower lip.

I want to squirm with needy, painful discomfort. I do not understand this reaction.

Hmm... Desire. It is a desire. This is what it feels like.

I lie down on the soft feather pillows. 'If you were mine.' Oh my - what would I do to be his? He is the only man who ever made my blood flow around my body. Yet he is also antagonistic; it is difficult, complicated, and confusing. One minute

he puts me off, the next he sends me fourteen-thousand-dollar books, then he stalks me like a stalker.

And yet, I spent the night in his hotel suite, and I feel safe. Protected. He cares enough to come and save me from a danger that he mistakenly perceives. He is not a dark knight at all, but a white knight in shining and dazzling armor - a classic romantic hero - Sir Gawain or Lancelot.

I rush out of bed in a frantic search for my jeans. He comes out of the bathroom wet and shiny from the shower, still unshaven, with just a towel around his waist, and here I am - all bare legs and an awkward gaping mouth. He is surprised to see me out of bed.

'If you are looking for your jeans, I sent them to the laundry.' His gaze is dark obsidian. 'They were splashed with your vomit.'

'Oh.' I blush scarlet. Why or why does he always catch me on the back foot?

'I sent Stephen to get another pair and some shoes. They are in the bag on the chair.'

Clean clothes. What an unexpected bonus.

'Uh... I am going to take a shower,' I mumble. 'Thank you.' What else can I say: I grab the bag and rush into the bathroom away from the bewildering proximity of naked Grayson. Michelangelo's David has nothing on him.

In the bathroom, it is hot and humid from where he showered. I undress and quickly get into the shower, anxious to be under the spray of cleansing water. It cascades over me, and I lift my face into the welcoming torrent. I want Grayson Maury. I want it. Simple fact. For the first time in my life, I want to go to bed with a man. I want to feel his hands and his mouth on me.

He said he loves his sensitive women. He is no single then. But he did not pass me, unlike Paul or Sam. I do not understand. Does he want me? He would not kiss me last week. Am I repulsive against him? And yet, I am here, and he brought me here. I just do not know what his game is. What is he thinking? You slept in his bed all night, and he did not touch you Naddalin. You do the math. My subconscious raised its ugly, sarcastic head. I do not know.

The water is warm and soothing. Hmm... I could stay in that shower, in her bathroom, forever. I grab the shower gel and it smells good. It is a delicious smell. I rub it all over myself, fantasizing that it is him - rubbing that heavenly scented soap into my body, on my breasts, on my stomach, between my thighs with his long fingers. Oh my. My heart rate is speeding up again, it is so... so good.

'Breakfast is here.' He knocks on the door, surprising me.

'All right,' I stutter, pulling myself cruelly out of my erotic reverie.

I get out of the shower and grab two towels. I put my hair in one and wrap it in Carmen Miranda style over my head. Hastily, I dry myself off, ignoring the pleasant feel of the towel rubbing against my over-sensitized skin.

I inspect the bag of jeans. Not only did Stephen bring me jeans and new Converse, but a pale blue shirt, socks, and underwear. Oh my. A clean bra and panties describing them in such a mundane and utilitarian way do not do them justice. They are an exquisite design of fancy European lingerie. All in lace and pale blue adornments. Wow. I am amazed and slightly intimidated by this underwear... In addition, they integrate perfectly. But of course, they do. I blush to think of the Buzz-Cut man in a lingerie store buying it for me. I wonder what else is in his job description.

I dress quickly. The rest of the clothes are perfectly adjusted. I abruptly dry my hair with a towel and desperately try to control it. But, as usual, he refuses to cooperate, and my only option is to hold him back with a tie. I will search for my purse when I find it. I take a deep breath. It is time to face Mr. Confusing.

I am relieved to find the room empty. I instantly search for my purse - but it is not there. Taking another deep breath, I walk into the living room of the suite. It is enormous. There is a plush and plush sitting area, all plush sofas and plush cushions, an elaborate coffee table with a stack of shiny large books, a desk area with a high-end Mac, a huge plasma TV on the wall, and Grayson is sitting at a dining table across the room reading a newspaper. It is the size of a tennis court or something, not that I play tennis, although I have looked at Maury a few times. Maury!

'Shit, Maury,' I croak. Grayson looks at me.

'She knows you're here and still alive.' I texted Jack, 'he said with just a hint of humor.

Oh no. I remember his fervent dance the night before. All his patented movements were used with maximum effect to seduce Grayson's brother no less! What will she think of my presence here? I have never been outside before. She is still with Jack. She has only done it twice before, and both times I had to endure the hideous pink pajamas for a week because of the fallout. She will think I had a one-night stand too.

Grayson looks at me imperiously. He wears a white linen shirt; the collar and cuffs are undone.

'Sit down,' he orders, gesturing to a seat at the table. I cross the room and sit across from him as asked. The table is loaded with food.

'Didn't know what you liked, so I ordered a selection from the breakfast menu.' He gives me a crooked and apologetic smile.

'It's very disgusting of you,' I whisper, baffled by the choice, even though I am hungry. 'Yes, it is.' He looks guilty.

I go for the pancakes, maple syrup, scrambled eggs, and bacon. Grayson tries to hide a smile as he returns to his egg white omelet. The food is delicious.

'Tea?' he asks.

'Yes please.'

He hands me a small teapot of hot water and on the saucer is a bag of Twinings English Breakfast tea. Hell, he remembers how much I love my tea.

'Your hair is very damp,' he growls.

'I couldn't find the hairdryer,' I mumbled, embarrassed. Not that I watched. The mouth of

Grayson presses himself into a hard line, but he says nothing.

'Thanks for organizing the clothes.'

'It is a pleasure, Naddalin. This color looks good on you.'

I blush and look at my fingers.

'You know, you really should learn to take a compliment.' His tone is castigated.

'I should give you some money for these clothes.'

He looks at me like I offended him on some level. I hurry.

'You already gave me the books, which of course I cannot accept. But these clothes, please let me pay you back.' I smile shyly at him.

'Naddalin, trust me, I can afford it.'

'That's not the point. Why should you buy them for me?'

'Because I can,' his eyes shine with a wicked glow.

'Just because you can doesn't mean you should,' I replied calmly as he arched an eyebrow at me, his eyes sparkling, and suddenly I feel like we are talking about something else, but I do not. I do not know what it is. Which reminds me...

'Why did you send me the books, Grayson?' My voice is soft. He puts his cutlery down and looks at me intently, his gray eyes burning with unfathomable emotion.

Holy shit - my dry mouth.

'Well, when you almost got run over by the rider - and I was holding you and you were looking at me - all of them kiss me, kiss me, Grayson,' he stops and shrugs slightly. 'I owed you an apology and a warning.' He runs his hand through his hair. 'Naddalin, I am not a man of heart and flowers, I do not have romance. My tastes are incredibly unique.'

You should get away from me. He closes his eyes as if he were defeated. 'There is something about you, however, and I find it impossible to stay away. But I think you have figured it out already.'

My appetite is gone. He cannot stay away!

'So no,' I whisper.

He gasps, his eyes wide.

'You don't know what you are saying.'

'Enlighten me, then.'

We are sitting looking at each other, none of us touching our food.

'Aren't you single then?' I breathe.

Amusement lights up his gray eyes.

'No, Naddalin, I'm not single.' He stops for this information to penetrate, and I blush scarlet. The mouth-to-brain filter is broken again. I cannot believe I just said it aloud. 'What are your plans for the next few days?' he asks, his voice low.

'I work today, starting at noon. What time is it?' I suddenly panic.

'It is just after ten o'clock, you have plenty of time. What about tomorrow?'

His elbows are on the table and his chin rests on his long, pointed fingers.

'Maury and I are going to start packing. We are moving to New York next weekend, and I have been working at Eastwood all this week.'

'Do you already have a place in New York?'

'Yes.'

'Or?'

'I do not remember the address. It is in the pike market area.'

'Not far from me,' his lips twitched into a half-smile. 'So, what are you going to do to work in New York?'

Where is he going with all these questions? The Grayson Murray Inquisition is as irritating as the Murray Smith Inquisition. 'I applied for internships. I am waiting to hear.' 'Did you apply to my company as I suggested?' I rinse... of course not. 'Um no.' 'And what's wrong with my business?' 'Your business or your business?' I smile. He smiles slightly. 'Are you smiling at me, Miss Black?' He tilts his head to one side, and he looks amused, but it is hard to tell. I blush and glance at my unfinished breakfast. I cannot look him in the eye when he uses that tone of voice. 'I'd like to bite that lip,' he whispers darkly. Oh my. I have no idea that I am chewing my lower lip. My mouth opens as I gasp and swallow at the same time. This must be the sexiest thing anyone has ever told me. My heart is pounding, and I am panting. Jeez, I am a shuddering, wet mess, and he has not even touched me. I squirm in my seat and meet his dark gaze. 'Why not you? I dispute quietly. 'Because I'm not going to touch you

Naddalin - not until I have your written consent to do so.' His lips suggest a smile.
What? 'What does it mean?'

'Exactly what I'm saying.' He sighs and shakes his head at me, amused, but also exasperated. 'I need to show you, Naddalin. What time do you finish working tonight?' 'About eight.' 'Well, we could go to New York tonight or next Saturday for dinner at my place, and then I will give you the facts. The choice is yours.' 'Why can't you tell me now?' I look petulant. 'Because I enjoy my breakfast and your company.' Once you are enlightened, you will not want to see me again. Holy shit. What does it mean? Is the white slave of little children in a part of the planet forsaken by God? Is he part of an underworld crime syndicate? That would explain why he is so rich. Is he deeply religious? Is he helpless? Surely not, he could prove it to me now. Oh my. I blush scarlet thinking of the possibilities. This is getting me nowhere. I would like to solve the Grayson Maury riddle as soon as possible. If that means that the secret, he has is so gross that I do not want to know it anymore then, frankly, that will be a relief. Do not lie to yourself - my subconscious is screaming at me - it is going to have to be terrible to make you run for the hills. 'Tonight.' He raises an eyebrow. 'Like Eve, you eat so fast from the tree of knowledge,' he smiles. 'Are you smiling at me, Mr. Maury?' I ask nicely. Pompous ass. He narrows his eyes at me and picks up his BlackBerry. He presses a number.

'Stephen. I am going to need Fake and Gay.' Fake and Gay! Who is he? 'From Pittsburgh, let us say eight-thirty... No, wait at Escala... all night.' All night long! 'Yes. On-call tomorrow morning. I will be driving from Pittsburgh to New York.' Pilot? 'Emergency pilot from ten-thirty.' He puts the phone down. No please or thank you. 'Do people always do what you tell them?' 'Usually, if they want to keep their job,' he said unmoved. 'What if they don't work for you?' 'Oh, I can be very persuasive, Naddalin. You should finish your breakfast. And then I will drop you home. I will pick you up from Eastwood's at eight when you are done. We will fly to New York.' I blink quickly at him. 'Fly?' 'Yes. I have a helicopter.' I am speechless. I have my second date with Grayson, oh-so-mysterious Maury. From coffee to helicopter rides. Wow. 'Shall we go by helicopter to New York?' 'Yes.' 'Why?' He smiles nastily. 'Because I can. Finish your breakfast.' How can I eat now? I am going to New York by helicopter with Grayson Maury. And he wants to bite my lip... I squirm at the thought 'Eat,' he said more sharply. 'Naddalin, I have a problem with wasted food... eat.' 'I can't eat all of this.' I am speechless at what is left on the table. 'Eat what is on your plate. If you had eaten properly yesterday, you would not be here, and I would not declare my hand so soon. Her mouth is drawn into a sinister line. He looks angry. I frown and return to my now cold food. I am too excited to eat, Grayson. You do not understand?

My subconscious explains. But I am too cowardly to express these thoughts aloud, especially when he looks so brooding. Hmm, like a little boy. This thought was funny. 'What's so funny?' he asks. I shake my head, not daring to tell him and keep my eyes on my food. As I swallow my last piece of pancake, I watch it. He looks at me speculatively. 'Good girl,' he said. 'I will take you home when you dry your hair. I do not want you to get sick.' There is some unspoken promise in his words. What does he mean? I leave the table, wondering for a moment if I should ask permission but rejecting the idea. It sounds like a dangerous precedent to be set. I go back to his room. A thought stops me. 'Where did you sleep last night?' I turn to look at him still sitting in the dining room chair. I do not see any blankets or sheets here - he had them put away. 'In my bed,' he said simply, his gaze unmoved again. 'Oh.' 'Yes, that was also new to me.' He smiles. 'Not having... sex.' There - I said the word. I blush - of course. 'No,' he shakes his head and frowns as if remembering something uncomfortable. 'Sleep with someone.' He picks up his newspaper and continues reading. What does this mean in the name of heaven? Has he never slept with anyone? I look at him in disbelief. She is the most mystifying person I have ever met. And it occurs to me that I slept with Grayson Maury, and I kicked myself - what would I have given to be aware of watching him sleep. See him vulnerable. Somehow, I find it hard to imagine this.

Well, allegedly all will be revealed tonight. In his room, I rummage in a chest of drawers and find the hairdryer. With my fingers, I dry my hair as best I can. When I am done, I head for the bathroom. I want to clean my teeth. I look at Grayson's toothbrush. It would be like having it in my mouth. Hmm... Glancing guiltily over my shoulder at the door, I feel the bristles on the toothbrush. They are wet. He must have used it before. Grabbing it quickly, I throw toothpaste on it and brush my teeth in a quick double time. I feel so mean. It is such a thrill.

Grabbing my t-shirt, bra, and panties from yesterday, I put them in the bag Stephen had and directed them to the living area on the hunt for my bag and jacket. Deep joy, there is a tie in my bag. Grayson watches me as I pull my hair back into a ponytail, his expression unreadable. His eyes follow me as I sit down and wait for him to finish. He is on his BlackBerry talking to someone. 'They want two?... How much will it cost?... Okay, and what security measures do we have in place?

...And they will go through Suez?... How safe is Ben Sudan?... And when do they get to Darfur?... Okay, let us go. Keep me posted on progress. 'He hangs up. 'Ready to go?' I agree. I wonder what his conversation was about. He puts on a navy striped jacket, picks up his car keys, and heads for the door. 'After you, Miss Black,' he

whispers as he opens the door for me. He looks so casually elegant. I stop, a little too long, drinking at his sight. And to think that I slept with him last night and, after all the tequila and the vomit, he is still here. Besides, he wants to take me to New York. Why me, I do not understand? I walk towards the door remembering his words - There is something about you - Well, the feeling is entirely mutual, Mr. Maury, and I am trying to find out what it is. We walk silently down the hall to the elevator. While we wait, I look at him through my lashes, and he looks at me out of the corner of my eyes. I smile and his lips quiver. The elevator arrives and we enter.

We are alone. Suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, our proximity in such an enclosed space, the atmosphere between us changes, charging with electric and uplifting anticipation. My breathing changes as my heart pounds. His head turns slightly towards me, his eyes darker. I bite my lip. 'Oh, fuck the paperwork,' he growls. He throws himself at me, pushing me against the elevator wall. Before I know it, he has both of my hands in one of his in a vise-like grip above my head, and he is pinning me to the wall using his hips. Holy shit. Her other hand grabs my ponytail and pulls down, bringing my face up, and her lips are on mine. It just is not painful. I moaned into her mouth, opening her tongue. He takes full advantage, his tongue exploring my mouth expertly. I have never been kissed like this. My tongue timidly strokes hers and joins hers in a slow erotic dance that is all about touch and feel, all bump and squeak. He raises his hand to grab my chin and holds me in place. I am helpless, my hands pinned, my face held and her hips holding me back. I feel his erection against my stomach.

Oh my... He wants me. Grayson Maury, the Greek god, wants me, and I want him, here... now, in the elevator. 'You. Are. So. Sweet,' he mutters, every word choppy. The elevator stops, the doors open and he walks away from me in the blink of an eye, leaving me hanging. Three men in business suits look at us both and smile at us as they get on board. My heartbeat is through the roof, I feel like I have run an uphill race. I want to bend down and grab my knees... but it is too obvious. I am watching him. He looks so cool and calm like he is doing the New York Times crossword. How unfair. Is he insensitive to my presence? He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and he gently breathes a deep breath. Oh, he is very well affected - and my tiny inner goddess swings in a sweet victorious samba. Businesspeople come out to the second floor. We still have a floor to go. 'You brushed your teeth,' he said, looking at me. 'I used your toothbrush,' I breathe. His lips curl up in a half-smile. 'Oh, Naddalin Black, what am I going to do with you?' The doors open on the first floor, and

he takes my hand and pulls me away. 'What is it for the elevators?' he mumbles, more to himself than to me as he crosses the hall. I had a tough time keeping up with him because my minds were completely, royally, scattered all over the floor and walls of elevator three at the Heathman Hotel.

Grayson opens the passenger door on the black Audi SUV, and I climb into it. It is a beast of a car. He did not mention the explosion of passion that exploded in the elevator. Should we talk about it or pretend it did not happen? It hardly seems real, my first flawless kiss. Over time, I give it the status of mythical, Arthurian legend, Lost City of Atlantis. It never happened, it never existed. I imagined everything. No, I touch my lips, swollen from his kiss. It happened. I am a changed woman. I want this man, desperately, and he wanted me.

I am watching him. Grayson is his usual self, polite and slightly aloof.

How confusing.

He starts the engine and reverses out of his place in the parking lot. He turns on the MP3 player. The interior of the car is filled with the sweetest and most magical music of two singing women. Oh wow... all my senses are in diNaddalinray, so it is doubly affecting. It sends delicious chills up my spine. Grayson steps out onto SW Park Avenue, and he drives with easy, lazy confidence.

'What are we listening to?'

'This is Delibes' flower duet from the opera Lakme. Do you like that?'

'Grayson, that is wonderful.'

'It's true, isn't it?' he smiles looking at me. And for a moment, it looks her age; young, carefree, and breathtakingly beautiful. Is this the key for him? Music, I sit and listen to the angelic voices, teasing and seducing me.

'Can I hear it again?'

'Of course.' Grayson pushes a button and the music hits me once more. It is a gentle, slow, gentle, and sure assault on my auditory senses.

'Do you like classical music?' I ask, hoping to get a rare glimpse of her personal preferences.

'My taste is eclectic, Naddalin, everything from Thomas Tallis to the Kings of Leon.

It depends on my mood. You?'

'Me too. Although I do not know who Thomas Tallis is.'

He turns and looks at me briefly before his eyes return to the road.

'I will play it for you someday. He is a 16th century British composer. Tudor, church choral music.' Grayson smiles at me. 'It sounds very esoteric, I know, but it's also magical, Naddalin.'

He presses a button and the Kings of Leon begin to sing. Hmm... that is what I know. Sex on fire. How appropriate. The music is interrupted by the sound of a cell phone ringing on the MP3 speakers. Grayson pushes a button on the steering wheel.

'Maury,' he snaps. He is so blunt.

'Mr. Maury, it is Welch here. I have the information you need.' A hoarse, disembodied voice comes from the speakers.

'Good. Email it to me. anything to add?'

'No sir.'

He presses the button, then the call ends, and the music returns. No goodbye or thank you. I am so happy that I never seriously considered working for him. I shudder at the very idea. He is just too controlling and cold with his employees. The music cuts off again for the phone.

'Maury.'

'The NDA has been emailed to you, Mr. Maury.' A woman's voice.

'Good. That is it, Andrea.'

'Have a nice day sir.'

Grayson hangs up with the push of a button on the steering wheel. The music is turned on very briefly when the phone rings again. Damn, is this his life, nagging phone calls?

'Maury,' he snaps.

'Hi, Grayson, are you flying?'

'Hello, Jack - I'm on speakerphone and I'm not alone in the car,' Grayson sighs.

'Who is with you?'

Grayson rolls his eyes.

'Naddalin Black'.

'Hi Naddalin!'

Naddalin!

'Hello Jack.'

'I've heard a lot about you,' Jack whispers huskily. Grayson frowns.

'Don't believe a word from Maury.'

Jack laughs.

'I'm dropping off Naddalin now.' Grayson emphasizes my name. 'Should I get you?' 'Of course.'

'See you soon.' Grayson hangs up and the music is back.

'Why do you insist on calling me Naddalin?'

'Because it's your name.'

'I prefer Naddalin.'

'Do you know?' he whispers.

We are at my apartment. It did not take long.

'Naddalin,' he said to himself. I frown at him, but he ignores my expression. 'What happened in the elevator - it's not going to happen again, well, unless it's premeditated.'

He stops in front of my duplex. I realize belatedly that he has not asked me where I live - yet he does. But then he sent the books, of course, he knows where I live. What capable cell phone tracking, helicopter possession, stalker would not do.

Why doesn't he kiss me again? I do not understand. Honestly, his last name should be Cryptic, not Maury. He gets out of the car, walking with easy, long-legged Billie around me to open the door, always sir - except in rare and precious moments in the elevators. I blush at the memory of his mouth on mine, and the thought that I had been unable to touch him comes to my mind. I wanted to run my fingers through his decadent, messy hair, but I had been unable to move my hands. I am frustrated in retrospect.

'I liked what happened in the elevator,' I whispered as I got out of the car. I am not sure if I hear an audible gasp, but I choose to ignore it and walk up the steps to the front door.

Maury and Jack are seated at our dining table. The fourteen thousand dollar books are gone. Thank God. I have plans for them. She has Maury's most ridiculous smile on her face, and she looks tangled up in a sexy way. Grayson follows me into the living room, and despite his smile, I have had an enjoyable time all night, Maury looks at him warily.

'Hi Naddalin.' She jumps up to hug me, then holds me at arm's length to examine me. She frowns and turns to Grayson.

'Hello, Grayson,' she says, and her tone is a little hostile.

'Miss Smith,' he said in his stiff, formal manner.

'Grayson, his name is Maury,' Jack mutters.

'Maury. Grayson gives him a polite nod and looks at Jack who is smiling and stands up to hug me.

'Hi, Naddalin,' he smiles, his blue eyes twinkling, and I love him immediately. He has nothing like Grayson, but then they are foster brothers.

'Hi, Jack,' I smile at him, and I am aware that I am biting my lip.

'Jack, we better go. Grayson said softly.

'Sure.' He turns to Maury, hugs her, and gives her a long, prolonged kiss.

Damn... get a room. I look at my feet, embarrassed. I look at Grayson and he looks at me intently. I squint at him. Why can't you kiss me like this? Jack continues to kiss Maury, sweeping her off her feet and plunging her into a dramatic grip so her hair touches the floor as he kisses her hard.

'See yeah, baby,' he smiles.

Maury just melts. I have never seen her melt before - the words friendly and submissive come to mind. Alright Maury, boy, Jack must be good. Grayson rolls his eyes and looks at me, his expression unreadable, though perhaps slightly amused. He tidies a stray section of my hair that came loose from my ponytail behind my ear. My breathing stops at the touch, and I tilt my head lightly against his fingers. His eyes soften and he runs his thumb over my lower lip. My blood is burning in my veins. And too quickly, his touch disappeared.

'See yeah, baby,' he whispers, and I must laugh because that does not sound like him at all. But even though I know he is irreverent, affection draws me deeply.

'I'll pick you up at eight o'clock.' He turns to leave, opens the front door, and walks out onto the porch. Jack follows him to the car but turns and sends Maury another kiss, and I feel an unwanted pain of jealousy.

'So, have you?' Maury asks as we watch them get into the car and leave, searing curiosity evident in his voice.

'No,' I crack in irritation, hoping that will stop the questions. We return to the apartment. 'You obviously did, though.' I cannot contain my urge. Maury always that I get him, trapped men. She is irresistible, beautiful, sexy, funny, above all... everything that I am not. But her smile in response is contagious.

'And I see him again tonight.' She claps her hands and jumps up and down like a little child. She cannot contain her excitement and happiness, and I cannot help but feel happy for her. A happy Maury... this is going to be interesting.

'Grayson is taking me to New York tonight.'

'New York?'

'Yes.'

'Maybe you will then?'

'Oh, I hope so.'

'Do you like him then?'

'Yes.'

'Like him enough to...?'

'Yes.'

She raises her eyebrows.

'Wow. Naddalin Black, finally fell in love with a man, and it is Grayson Maury - hot sexy billionaire.'

'Oh yeah - it's all about the money.' I smile, and we both burst into a giggle.

'Is this a new blouse?' she asks, and I left her all the irrelevant details about my night.

'Has he kissed you yet?' she asks as she prepares the coffee.

I am blushing.

'Once.'

'Once!' she is laughing about it.

I nod, ashamed of the face.

'He is very reserved.'

She frowns.

'It's strange.'

'I don't think weird really covers this,' I whisper.

'We have to make sure that you are just irresistible for tonight,' she said with determination.

Oh no... it takes time, to be humiliating and painful.

'I have to be at work in an hour.'

'I can work within that period. Come on.' Maury grabs my hand and leads me to his room.

The day drags on at Eastwood's even though we are busy. We have reached the summer season, so I must spend two hours restocking the shelves after the store is closed. It is crazy to work and it leaves me too much time to think. I have not had much luck all day.

Under Maury's tireless and downright intrusive instructions, my legs and armpits are shaved to perfection, my eyebrows plucked, and I am polished all over. It was a most unpleasant experience. But she assures me that is what men expect these days. What else will he expect? I must convince Maury that is what I want to do. For some strange reason, she does not trust him, possibly because he is so rigid and formal. She says she cannot put her finger on it, but I promised to text her when I got to New York. I did not tell her about the helicopter, she would be freaking out.

I also have the same problem. He left three messages and seven missed calls on my cell phone.

He is also called home twice. Maury was very vague as to where I am. He will know she has me covered. Maury is not doing anything vague. But I decided to let it simmer. I am still too angry with him.

Grayson mentioned some sort of written paperwork, and I am not sure if he was kidding or if I am going to have to sign something. It is so frustrating to try to guess. And on top of any angst, I can barely contain my excitement or my nerves. Tonight is evening!

This time, am I ready for this? My inner goddess looks at me, patting her little foot impatiently. She has been up for this for years, and she is up for anything with Grayson Maury, but I still do not understand what he sees in me... mousey Naddalin Black - it just does not make sense.

He is on time, of course, and is waiting for me when I leave Eastwood. He steps out of the back of the Audi to open the door and gives me a warm smile.

'Good evening, Miss Black,' he said.

'Mr. Maury. I nod politely at him as I get into the backseat of the car. Stephen is seated in the driver's seat.

'Hello, Stephen,' I said.

'Good evening, Miss Black,' her voice is polite and professional. Grayson climbs over to the other side and squeezes my hand, giving it a slight squeeze that I feel all over my body.

'How was the job?' he asks.

'Very long,' I replied, and my voice was hoarse, too low, and full of need.

'Yeah, it's been a long day for me too.' His tone is serious.

'What did you do?' I do it.

'I went hiking with Jack.' His thumb strokes my joints, back and forth, and my heart skips a beat as my breathing quickens. How does he do this to me? It only affects an exceedingly small area of my body and hormones fly away.

The trip to the helipad is short and, before I know it, we are arriving. I wonder where the legendary helicopter is. We are in a built-up area of the city and even I know that helicopters need space to take off and land. Stephen parks get out and open the door of my car. Grayson is beside me in an instant and takes my hand back.

'Ready?' he asks. I nod and want to say anything, but I cannot articulate the words because I am too nervous, too excited.

'Stephen'. He nods to his driver and we head into the building, straight to a set of elevators. Elevator! The memory of our kiss this morning comes back to haunt me.

I have not thought of anything else all day. Reverie at Eastwood's cash register. Twice Mr. Eastwood had to shout my name to bring me back to Earth. To say I was distracted would be the understatement of the year. Grayson looks at me, a slight smile on his lips. Ha! He also thinks about it.

'It's only three stories,' he said dryly, his gray eyes dancing in amusement. He must be telepathic. It is scary.

I try to keep my face straight as I enter the elevator. The doors close, and there it is, the strange electric pull crackling between us, enslaving me. I close my eyes in a vain attempt to ignore him. He tightens his grip on my hand, and five seconds later the doors open onto the roof of the building. There you go, a white helicopter with the name Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. written in blue with the company logo on the side. It is certainly a misuse of company property.

He takes me to a small office where an old-timer sits behind the desk.

'Here's your flight plan, Mr. Maury. All external verifications are carried out. He is ready and waiting for you sir. You are free to go.'

'Thanks, Joe.' Grayson smiled warmly at him.

Oh. Someone who deserves Grayson's polite treatment, he is not an employee. I look at the old man with admiration.

'Let's go,' Grayson says, and we head for the helicopter. When you are up close, it is a lot bigger than I thought. I expected this to be a roadster version for two, but it has at least seven seats. Grayson opens the door and walks me over to one of the seat upfronts.

'Sit down - don't touch anything,' he orders, climbing up behind me.

He closes the door slamming. I am glad the area is lit, otherwise, I would have a tough time seeing inside the small cockpit. I sit in my assigned seat and he crouches down next to me to secure me to the harness. It is a four-point harness with

all the straps connected to a central buckle. He tightens the two top straps so I can barely move.

He is so close and attentive to what he is doing. If I could only lean forward, my nose would be in her hair. It smells, clean, cool, heavenly, but I am rigidly attached to my seat and effectively still. He looks up and smiles as if enjoying his usual private joke, his gray eyes warm. He is so close. I hold my breath as he pulls on one of the top straps.

'You are safe, no escape,' he whispers, his eyes burning. 'Breathe, Naddalin,' he adds softly. Reaching out, he strokes my cheek, running his long fingers up to my chin, which he grasps between his thumb and forefinger. He leans forward and plants a brief, chaste kiss on my lips, leaving me tottering, my insides tightening at the exciting and unexpected touch of his lips.

'I like this harness,' he whispers.

What?

He sits down next to me and curls up in his seat, then begins a lengthy process of checking gauges and flipping switches and knobs to the bewildering array of dials, lights, and switches in front of me. Small lights blink and blink from various dials, and the entire dashboard lights up.

'Put on your cans,' he said, pointing to a helmet in front of me. I push them in and the rotor blades start. They are deafening. He puts on his headphones and continues to flip various switches.

'I'm just going through all the pre-flight checks.' Grayson's disembodied voice is in my ears through the headphones. I turn around and smile at him.

'Do you know what you are doing?' I ask. He turns around and smiles at me.

'I have been a fully qualified pilot for four years, Naddalin, you are safe with me.' He gives me a wolf smile. 'Well, while we fly,' he adds, winking at me.

Flashing... Grayson!

'Are you ready?'

I nod with wide eyes.

'Okay, turn. PDX is Fake and Gay Golf - Golf Echo Hotel, cleared for take-off.

Please confirm, done.'

'Fake and Gay - you are clear. PDX to call, go to four thousand, heading for zero one zero, finished.'

The Roger tower, Fake and Gay set, repeatedly. The helicopter climbs slowly and smoothly into the air.

Pittsburgh disappears before us as we head into US airspace, although my stomach remains firmly in Oregon. Whoa! All the bright lights shrink until they gently twinkle beneath us. It is like looking from the inside of a fishbowl. Once we are higher there is nothing to see. It is dark, not even the moon to light up our trip. How can he see where we are going?

'Eerie is not it?' Grayson's voice is in my ears.

'How do you know you are going the right way?'

'Here.' He points his long index finger at one of the gauges, and he points to an electronic compass. 'This is a Eurocopter EC135. One of the safest in its class. It is equipped for night flight.' He looks at me and smiles at me.

'There's a helipad above the building I live in. That is where we are heading.'

Of course, there is a helipad where he lives. I am so out of my league here. His face is softly lit by the dashboard lights. He concentrates hard and continually looks at the different dials in front of him. I drink his features under my eyelashes. He has a beautiful profile. Straight nose, square jaw - I would like to run my tongue along his jaw. He has not shaved, and his stubble makes the prospect doubly tempting. Hmm... I would like to feel how rough it is under my tongue, my fingers, against my face.

'When you fly at night, you fly blind. You must trust the instrumentation,' he interrupts my erotic reverie.

'How long will the flight take?' I do it out of breath. I was not thinking about sex at all, no, not at all.

'Less than an hour, the wind is in our favor.'

Hmm, less than an hour from New York... not bad, no wonder we are taking the plane.

I have less than an hour before the big reveal. All the muscles tighten deep in my stomach.

I have a serious case of butterflies. They are blooming in my stomach. What the fuck is he in store for me?

'Are you okay, Naddalin?'

'Yes.' My answer is short, cut, squeezed through my nerves.

He is smiling, but it is hard to tell in the dark. Grayson flips yet another switch.

'PDX is Fake and Gay now at four thousand plus.' It exchanges information with air traffic control. It all sounds very professional to me. We are moving from Pittsburgh airspace to New York International Airport.

'Got Sea-Tac, standing up and down.'

'Look over there.' It shows a small point of light in the distance. 'This is New York.'

'Do you always impress women that way, come fly in my helicopter?' I ask, really interested.

'I have never bought a girl here, Naddalin. It is another first for me.' Her voice is calm, serious.

Oh, that was an unexpected response. Another first: Oh the sleeping stuff, maybe?

'Are you impressed?'

'I am impressed, Grayson.'

He smiles.

'Awed?' And for a moment, he is his age again.

I agree.

'You are so... competent.'

'Thanks, Miss Black,' he said politely. He is happy, but I am not sure.

We drive through the night in silence for a while. New York's bright spot is slowly expanding.

'Sea-Tac tour to Fake and Gay. Flight plan for Escala in place. Please continue. And wait. Done.'

'It is Fake and Gay, understand Sea-Tac. Stand up, repeatedly.'

'You obviously enjoy it,' I whisper.

'What?' He looks at me. He looks puzzled in the dim light of the instruments.

'Fly', I answer.

'It takes control and focus... how could I not love it when my favorite is in full swing.'

'Flight?'

'Yes. Glide towards the layperson. Gliders and helicopters - I fly them both.'

'Oh.' Expensive hobby. I remember him telling me that during the interview. I like to read and sometimes go to the movies. I am out of my depth here.

'Fake and Gay, come on please come on.' The disembodied voice of air traffic control interrupts my reverie. Grayson responds, sounding in control and confident.

New York is getting closer. We are now on the very periphery. Wow! It looks stunning. New York at night, seen from the sky...

'Sounds good, doesn't it?' Grayson whispers.

I nod enthusiastically. It feels like another world - unreal - and I feel like I am on a giant movie set, Sam's favorite movie perhaps, 'Bladerunner'. The memory of

Sam's attempted kiss haunts me. I am starting to feel a little cruel for not calling him back. He can wait until tomorrow... surely.

'We'll be there in a few minutes,' Grayson mumbles, and suddenly my blood pats in my ears as my heart rate quickens and adrenaline rushes through my system. He starts talking to air traffic control again, but I no longer listen. Oh my... I am going to pass out. My fate is in his hands.

We are now flying among the buildings, and ahead I can see a large skyscraper with a helipad at the top. The word Escala is painted white above the building. It is getting closer and closer, bigger, and bigger... like my anxiety. God, I hope I do not let him down.

He will find me missing one way or another. I would have liked to listen to Maury and borrow one of his dresses, but I love my black jeans, and I am wearing a soft mint green shirt and Maury's black jacket. I look smart enough. I squeeze the edge of my seat tighter and tighter. I can do it. I can do it. I chant this mantra as the skyscraper looms below us.

The helicopter slows down and hovers, and Grayson lands it on the helipad at the top of the building. My heart is in my mouth. I cannot decide if it is out of nervous anticipation, relief that we arrived alive, or fear of failure somehow. It cuts off the ignition and the rotor blades are slow and quiet until all I hear is the sound of my erratic breathing.

Grayson takes off his headphones, reaches out his hand, and takes mine off too.

'We're here,' he said softly.

His gaze is so intense, half in the shadows and half in the brilliant white light of the landing lights. Black knight and white knight, that is an apt metaphor for Grayson. He looks tense. His jaw is tight and his eyes are tight. He unbuckles his seat belt and reaches out to unbuckle mine. Her face is inches from mine.

'You have nothing to do that you do not want to. You know that, don't you?' His tone is so serious, even desperate, his gray eyes passionate. He takes me by surprise.

'I would never do anything I didn't want to do, Grayson.' And as I say those words, I do not feel their conviction because right now - I would do anything for that man sitting next to me. But it does the trick. He is at peace.

He looks at me warily for a moment and somehow, even though he is so tall, he does so to Billie fully make his way to the helicopter door and open it. He jumps up, waiting for me to follow him, and takes my hand as I climb onto the helipad. It is very windy above the building, and I am worried that I am standing at least thirty stories in an open space. Grayson wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

'Come on,' he cries over the sound of the wind. He leads me to an elevator shaft and, after typing a number on a keypad, the doors open. It is warm inside and all in mirrored glass. I can see Grayson endlessly everywhere I look, and the wonderful thing is he holds me endlessly too. Grayson types another code on the keypad, then the doors close and the elevator descends.

Moments later, we are in an all-white foyer. In the middle is a dark wood round table with an incredibly huge bouquet of white flowers on it. On the walls, there are paintings everywhere. It opens two double doors, and the white theme continues through the wide hallway and directly opposite where a lavish room opens. This is the main living room, double-height. Huge is too small a word for that. The back wall is glass and leads to a balcony that overlooks New York.

To the right is an imposing 'U' shaped sofa that comfortably seats ten adults. It faces a modern, state-of-the-art stainless steel fireplace - or platinum for all I know -.

The fire is lit and blazes slowly. On the left next to us, near the entrance, is the kitchen area.

All white with dark wood worktops and a large breakfast bar that seats six.

Near the kitchen, in front of the glass wall, is a dining table surrounded by sixteen chairs. And tucked away in the corner is a shiny black grand piano. Oh yes... he plays the piano too. There is the art of all shapes and sizes on all the walls. This apartment looks more like a gallery than a living space.

'May I take your jacket?' Grayson asks. I shake my head. I am still cold from the wind on the helipad.

'Would you like a drink?' he asks. I blink at him. After last night! Does he try to be funny For a second, I think about asking for a margarita - but I do not have the courage?

'I'm going to have a glass of white wine, would you like to join me?'

'Yes, please,' I whisper.

I am standing in this huge room, feeling out of place. I walk over to the glass wall and realize that the bottom half of the wall opens like an accordion to the balcoPittsburgh. New York is lit and animated in the background. I go back to the kitchen area - it takes a few seconds, it is so far from the glass wall - and Grayson opens a bottle of wine. He took off his jacket.

'Pouilly Fume suits you?'

'I do not know anything about wine, Grayson. I am sure it will be fine.' My voice is soft and hesitant. My heart is beating. I want to run. It is rich. Seriously exaggerated Bill Gates style richness. What am I doing here? You know very well what you are doing here - my subconscious is laughing at me. Yeah, I want to be in Grayson Maury's bed.

'Here.' He hands me a glass of wine. Even the glasses are rich... heavy, contemporary, crystal. I take a sip and the wine is light, crunchy, and delicious.

'You're very calm, and you do not even blush. Actually - I think it is the palest I have ever seen you, Naddalin,' he whispered. 'You are hungry?'

I shake my head. Not for the food.

'It's a very big place that you have here.'

'Large?'

'Large.'

'It's big,' he nods, and his eyes sparkle with amusement. I take another sip of the wine.

'Are you playing?' I point my chin towards the piano.

'Yes.'

'Good?'

'Yes.'

'Of course you do. Is there something you cannot do well?'

'Yes... a few little things.' He takes a sip of his wine. He does not take his eyes off me. I can feel them following me as I turn and look around this large room. The bedroom is the wrong word.

It is not a play - it is a mission statement.

'Do you want to sit down?'

I nod, and he takes my hand and leads me over to the large off-white sofa. As I sit down, I am struck by the fact that I have the impression that Tess Durbeyfield is looking at the new house which belongs to the famous Alec D'Urberville. This thought makes me smile.

'What's so fun?' He sits down next to me, turning to face me. He rests his head on his right hand, his elbow resting on the back of the sofa.

'Why did you specifically give me Tess des D'Urbervilles?' I ask. Grayson looks at me for a moment. He is surprised by my question.

'Well, you said you liked Thomas Hardy.'

'Is that the only reason?' Even I can hear the disappointment in my voice. Her mouth presses into a hard line.

'It seemed appropriate to me. I could hold you to an incredibly high ideal like Angel Clare or completely debase you like Alec D'Urberville,' he murmurs, and his gray eyes blink dark and dangerous.

'If there are only two choices, I'll take the debasement.' I whisper looking at him. My subconscious looks at me in awe. He gasps.

'Naddalin, please stop biting your lip. It is very entertaining. You do not know what you are saying.'

'That's the reason I'm here.'

He frowns.

'Yes. Could you excuse me for a second?' He disappears through a wide door on the other side of the room. He left for a few minutes and returned with a document.

'It's a nondisclosure agreement.' He shrugs his shoulders and has Billie looking a little embarrassed. 'My lawyer insists on this.' He hands it to me. I am completely confused. 'If you go for option two, debasement, you'll have to sign this.'

'What if I don't want to sign anything?'

'So those are Angel Clare's high ideals, well, for most books anyway.'

'What does this agreement mean?'

'It means you cannot reveal anything about us. Nothing, to anyone.'

I look at him in disbelief. Holy shit. It is bad, bad, and now I am very curious about it.

'Okay. I will sign.'

He hands me a pen.

'Aren't you even going to read it?'

'No.'

He frowns.

'Naddalin, you should always read everything you sign,' he berates me.

'Grayson, what you don't understand is that I wouldn't tell anyone about us anyway.' Evan Maury. So it does not matter if I sign an agreement or not. If that means so much to you or your lawyer... who you are talking to obviously, then fine. I will sign.
'

He looks at me and he nods gravely.

'Good point well done, Miss Black.'

I sign generously on the dotted line on both copies and return one to him. Folding the other one, I place my purse and take a big sip of my wine. I look so much braver than I feel.

'Does that mean you're going to make love to me tonight, Grayson?' Holy shit. Did I just say His mouth opens a little, but He recovers quickly?

'No Naddalin, it is not. First, I am not having sex. I am fucking... hard. Second, there is a lot more paperwork to do, and third, you do not know yet. What you are into. You could always run for the hills. Come on, I want to show you my playroom.'

My mouth opens. Fuck hard! Holy shit, that looks so... hot. But why are we looking at a playroom? I am confused.

'Want to play on your Xbox?' I ask. He laughs loudly.

'No, Naddalin, no Xbox, no Playstation. Come on.' He stands up, holding out his hand. I let him lead me back to the hallway. To the right of the double doors, where we entered, another door leads to a staircase. We go up to the second floor and turn right. Pulling a key out of his pocket, he unlocks another door and takes a deep breath.

'You can leave anytime. The helicopter is ready to take you when you want to go, you can stay the night and come home in the morning. It is okay whatever you decide.'

'Just open the fucking door, Grayson.'

He opens the door and steps back to let me in. I watch it once more. I want to know what is there. I take a deep breath.

-And-

I feel like I have traveled back in time to the 16th century and the Spanish Inquisition.

Holy shit.

The first thing I notice is the smell; leather, wood, polished with a slight citrus scent. It is very pleasant and the lighting is soft, subtle. I cannot see the source,

but it is around the ledge in the room, giving off an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb effect to the spacious room, and the floor is in old varnished wood. There is a large X-shaped wooden cross attached to the wall facing the doorway. It is made of polished mahogany and there are retaining cuffs at each corner. Above it is a cast-iron grating suspended from the ceiling, at least eight square feet in size, and from which hang all kinds of ropes, chains, and glittering chains. Near the door, two long poles polished and richly carved, like the spindles of a banister, but longer, hang like curtain rods through the wall. From them swing a surprising assortment of paddles, whips, whips, and fun feathered instruments.

Beside the door is a sizable mahogany chest of drawers, each drawer slender as if designed to hold specimens in a crisp old museum. I briefly wonder what the drawers contain. Do I want to know? In the far corner is an upholstered bench in cowhide leather, and attached to the wall next to it is a polished wooden stand that looks like a billiard or billiard cue holder, but when you look at it more. It contains canes of different lengths and widths. There is a sturdy six-foot-long table in the opposite corner - polished wood with intricately carved legs - and two matching stools underneath.

But what dominates the room is a bed. It is larger than the king-size, an ornately carved Rococo four-poster with a flat top. Looks like the end of the 19th century. Under the canopy, can see more chains and sparkling cuffs. There is no bedding... just a mattress covered in red leather and red satin cushions stacked at one end.

At the foot of the bed, aside from a few feet away, is a large oxblood chesterfield sofa, just wedged in the middle of the room facing the bed. A strange arrangement... of having a sofa facing the bed, and I smile to myself - I chose the sofa as strange when it is the most mundane piece of furniture in the room. I look up and stare at the ceiling. There are carabiners all over the ceiling at odd intervals. I vaguely wonder what they are for. Strangely enough, all the wood, dark walls, moody lighting, and oxblood leather make the room soft and romantic... I know that is it but, this is Grayson's version. Sweet and romantic.

I turn around, and he looks at me intently as I knew he would be, his expression completely unreadable. I walk further into the room and he follows me. The feathery thing intrigued me. I touch it hesitantly. It is suede, like a little cat with nine tails but bushier, and there are exceedingly small plastic beads at the end.

'It's called a whip,' Grayson's voice is calm and soft.

A whip... hmm. I am in shock. My subconscious migrated or was stunned or just collapsed and expired. I am numb. I can observe and absorb but not articulate my feelings about it all because I am in shock. What is the appropriate response to finding out a potential lover is a completely bizarre sadist or masochist? Fear... yes... that is the dominant feeling. I recognize him now. But oddly not from him - I do not think he would have hurt me, well, not without my consent. So many questions cloud my mind.

Why? How? When? How many times? I walk over to the bed and run my hands over one of the intricately carved poles. The post is very robust, the artisanship exceptional.

'Say something,' Grayson orders, his voice deceptively soft.

'Are you doing this to people or are they doing it to you?'

His mouth twists, amused or relieved.

'People?' He blinks several times as he considers his answer. 'I do this to women who want me to do it.'

I do not understand.

'If you have volunteer volunteers, why am I here?'

'Because I really want to do this with you.'

'Oh,' I gasp. Why?

I wander to the far corner of the room and pat the high-waisted padded bench and run my fingers over the leather. He likes to hurt women. This thought depresses me.

'Are you a sadist?'

'I am a Dominant.' His eyes are a burning, intense gray.

'What does it mean?' I whisper.

'It means that I want you to surrender yourself willingly to me, in all things.'

I frown as I try to digest this idea.

'Why should I do this?'

'To please me,' he whispers, tilting his head to one side, and I see a ghost grinning.

Please him! He wants me to please him! My mouth is opening. Please, Grayson Maury. And I realize, at that point, that yes, that is exactly what I want to do. I want him to be damn happy with me. It is a revelation.

'In very simple terms, I want you to want to please me,' he said softly. Her voice is hypnotic.

'How do I do that?' My mouth is dry and I wish I had more wine. Okay, I understand what's joking, but I am puzzled by the setting up of the sweet-boudoir-ElizabPaul torture. Do I want to know the answer?

'I have rules, and I want you to follow them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I will reward you. Otherwise, I will punish you, and you will learn,' he whispers. I glance at the cane stand as he says this.

'And where is all of this located?' I wave my hand in the general direction of the room.

'It is all part of the incentive package. Reward and punishment.'

'Then you will get your kicks by exerting your will on me.'

'It is about earning your trust and respect, so you will let me exercise my will on you.'

I will gain a lot of pleasure, joy, even in your submission. The more you submit, the greater my joy - it is an amazingly simple equation.'

'Okay, and what do I get out of it?'

He shrugs his shoulders and almost looks sorry.

'Me,' he said simply.

Oh my. Grayson runs his hand through his hair as he looks at me.

'You won't reveal anything, Naddalin,' he whispers exasperatedly. 'Let us go back downstairs where I can concentrate better. It is very distracting to have you here.'

He holds out his hand to me, and now I hesitate to take it.

Maury had said he was dangerous, she was so right. How did she know it was dangerous to my health because I know I will say yes. And part of me does not want to.

Part of me wants to run screaming from this room and everything it stands for. I am so out of my depth here.

'I'm not going to hurt you, Naddalin.' His gray eyes are pleading and I know he is telling the truth. I take his hand and he leads me out the door.

'If you do this, let me show you.' Rather than come back downstairs, he comes straight out of the playroom, as he calls it, and walks down a hallway. We go through several doors to the one at the end. Beyond is a bedroom with a large double bed, all in white... everything, furniture, walls, bedding. It is barren and cold but with the most glorious view of New York through the glass wall.

'This will be your room. You can decorate it however you want, have what you want here.'

'My room, do you expect me to move?' I cannot hide the horror in my voice.

'Not full time. Just say, Friday night through Sunday. We must talk about all this, negotiate. If you want to do that,' he adds in a calm, hesitant voice.

'Am I going to sleep here?'

'Yes.'

'Not with you.'

'No. I told you, I don't sleep with anyone except you when you're stunned to drink.' His eyes are rebuking.

My mouth presses into a hard line. This is what I cannot reconcile. Kind and caring Grayson, who saves me from drunkenness and gently holds me while I vomit in azaleas, and the monster who has whips and chains in a special room.

'Where do you sleep?'

'My room is downstairs. Come on, you must be hungry.'

'Oddly, it looks like I've lost my appetite,' I whisper excitedly.

'You must eat, Naddalin,' he warns and, taking my hand, leads me back downstairs.

Back in the incredibly large room, I am filled with deep apprehension. I am on the edge of a precipice and I must decide whether to jump.

'I am fully aware that this is a dark path that I am leading you Naddalin, which is why I really want you to think about it. You must have questions,' he said as he wandered into the kitchen, releasing me. hand.

I do. But where to start?

'You signed your NDA, you can ask me anything you want, and I will answer.'

I stand at the breakfast counter watching him as he opens the fridge and pulls out a plate of different cheeses with two large bunches of green and red grapes. He places the plate on the worktop and proceeds to cut a French baguette.

'Sit.' He points to one of the stools in the breakfast bar and I obey his order.

If I want to do this, I am going to have to get used to it. I realize he is also bossy since I first met him.

'You mentioned the paperwork.'

'Yes.'

'What paperwork?'

'Well, other than the NDA, a contract that says what we will do and what we will not do. I need to know your limits, and you need to know mine. It is consensual, Naddalin.'

'What if I don't want to do this?'

'That's good,' he said cautiously.

'But we won't have any kind of relationship?' I ask.

'No.'

'Why?'

'It's the only kind of relationship I'm interested in.'

'Why?'

He shrugs his shoulders.

'This is how I am.'

'How did you become like this?'

'Why is someone like that? It is a little hard to answer. Why do some people like cheese and others hate it? Do you like cheese? Mrs. Jones - my housekeeper - left this for supper. 'He takes large white plates from a cupboard and places one in front of me.

We are talking about cheese... Holy shit.

'What are your rules that I must follow?'

'I wrote them down. We will go through them after we have eaten.'

Food. How can I eat now?

'I'm really not hungry,' I whisper.

'You're going to eat,' he said simply. Dominating Grayson, everything becomes clear. 'Would you like another glass of wine?'

'Yes please.'

He pours wine into my glass and comes to sit next to me. I take a hasty sip.

'Help yourself to eat, Naddalin.'

I take a small bunch of grapes. I can do it. He narrows his eyes. 'Have you been like this for a while?' I ask. 'Yes.' 'Is it easy to find women who want to do this?' He raises an eyebrow at me. 'You would be amazed,' he said dryly. 'So why am I not

getting it?' 'Naddalin, I told you. There is something about you. I cannot leave you alone.' He smiles ironically. 'I am like a moth to a flame.' Her voice darkens. 'I want you, especially now when you bite your lip again.' He takes a deep breath and swallows. My stomach is somersaulting - it wants me... weirdly, that is right, but this strange, perverted handsome man wants me. 'You got this cliché the wrong way.' I growl. I am the moth and he is the flame, and I am going to burn myself. I know. 'Eat!' 'No.

I have not signed anything yet, so I think I will keep my free will a bit longer if that is okay with you.' Her eyes soften and her lips meet in a smile. 'As you wish, Miss Black.' 'How many women? I blurt out the question, but I am so curious. 'Fifteen.' Oh... not as much as I thought. 'For long periods?' 'Some of them, yes.' 'Have you ever hurt someone?' 'Yes.' Holy shit. 'Wrong?' 'No.' 'Do you want to hurt me? 'What do you mean?' 'Physically, are you going to hurt me?' 'I'll punish you when you need it, and it will be painful.' I feel a little weak. I take another sip of the wine. Alcohol - it will make me brave. 'Have you ever been beaten? I ask. '

'Yes.' Oh... that surprises me. Before I can question him further about this revelation, he interrupts my thought. 'Let us talk about this in my office. I want to show you something. It is so hard to deal with. Here, I foolishly thought that I would spend a night of unparalleled passion in this man's bed, and we are negotiating this strange arrangement. I follow him to his office, a spacious room with another bay window that opens onto the balcony. He sits down on the desk, gestures for me to sit on a leather chair in front of him, and hands me a piece of paper. 'These are the rules. They can be subject to change. They are part of the contract, which you can also have. Read these rules and let us discuss them.'

RULES Obedience: The Submissive will obey all instructions given by the Dominant immediately, without hesitation or reservation, and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except for activities which are described within strict limits (Annex 2.)

She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation. Sleep: The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of seven hours of sleep per night when not with the Dominant. Food: The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit. Clothing: During the term of office, the

Submitter will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive will use.

The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall during the Term of Office such adornments as the Dominant requires, in the presence of the Dominant and at such other time as the Dominant deems appropriate. Exercise: The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four times per week in one-hour sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the progress of the Submissive. Personal Hygiene / Beauty: La Soumise will keep herself clean and shaved and/or always shaved.

The Submissive will visit a beauty salon chosen by the Dominant at times decided by the Dominant, and undergo any treatment the Dominant deems appropriate. Personal Safety: The submissive does not drink to excess, does not smoke, does not take recreational drugs, and does not put herself in unnecessary danger. Personal Suitability: The Submissive will not enter a sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant.

The Submissive will always conduct herself respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant. She will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed when she is not in the presence of the Dominant. Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant. Holy shit. 'Strict limits?' I ask.

'Yes. What you will not do, what I will not do, we must spell out in our agreement.' 'I am not sure if I will accept money for clothes. It is not okay.' I move uncomfortably, the word 'ho' echoes in my head. 'I want to give you some money, let me buy you some clothes. I might need you to accompany me to the receptions, and I want you to be well dressed. I am sure your pay, when you get a job, will not cover the kind of clothes I would like you to wear. ' I do not have to wear them when I am not with you? ' 'No.' 'Okay.' Think of them as uniforms. 'I don't want to exercise four times a week.' 'Naddalin, I need you to be flexible, strong, and with stamina. Believe me, you need to exercise. 'But surely not four times a week, how about three?' 'I want you to do four.' 'I thought it was a negotiation?' He squeezes my lips. 'Okay, Miss Black, another point well done. How about an hour in three days and a day in half an hour?'

'Three days, three hours. I feel like you are going to work out for me when I am here.' He smiles nastily and his eyes shine as relieved.

'Yes, I am. Okay, okay. Are you sure you do not want to do an internship with my company? You are a good negotiator.' 'No, I don't think that's a good idea.' I look at his rules. Waxing! Hair removal what? All 'So the limits. They are mine.' He hands me another piece of paper. Strict limits No acts involving fire games No acts involving urination or defecation and their products No acts involving needles, knives, piercings, or blood No acts involving gynecological medical instruments No acts involving children or animals No acts which will leave permanent marks on the skin No acts involving the control of breathing Ugh. He must note them!

2

Of course - they all sound very sane, and frankly, necessarily... surely anyone in their right mind would want to be involved in this sort of thing? Although I now feel a little uncomfortable. 'Is there anything you would like to add?' he asks gently. Shit. I've no idea. I am completely confused. He looks at me and frowns. 'Is there something you won't do?' 'I do not know.' 'What do you mean you don't know?' I squirm uncomfortably and bite my lip. 'I have never done anything like this.'

'Well, when you've had sex, is there anything you didn't like to do?' For the first time in ages, I blush. 'You can tell me, Naddalin. We must be honest with each other or it will not work. I squirm uncomfortably again and look at my knotted fingers. 'Tell me,' he orders. 'Well... I have never had sex before so I do not know.' My voice is small. I look at him, and he looks at me, his mouth open, frozen, and pale - pale. 'Never?' he whispers. I shake my head. 'You're a virgin?' he breathes. I nod, blushing again. He closes his eyes and seems to be counting to ten. When he opens them again, he is angry and looks at me. 'Why didn't you tell me?' he growls.

Grayson runs both hands through his hair and paced around his office.

Two hands - it is a double exasperation. His usual concrete control seems to have slipped a notch.

'I don't understand why you didn't tell me,' he berates me.

'The subject was never brought up. I am not in the habit of revealing my sexual status to anyone I meet. I mean, we barely know each other.' I look at my hands. Why do I feel guilty? Why is he so crazy? I am watching him.

'Well you know a lot more about me now,' he snaps, his mouth pressing into a hard line. 'I knew you were inexperienced, but a virgin!' He says it like it is a dirty word.

'Damn, Naddalin, I just showed you,' he moaned. 'That God forgives me. Have you ever been kissed except by me?

'Of course I have.' I do my best to look offended. Okay... twice.

'And a nice young man didn't sweep you away, I just don't understand.' You are twenty-one, almost twenty-two. You are beautiful. He runs his hand through his hair again.

Beautiful. I blush with pleasure. Grayson Maury thinks I am beautiful. I tie my fingers together, staring at them, trying to hide my awkward smile. He is myopic, my subconscious has raised its sleepwalking head. Where was she when I needed her?

'And you are seriously discussing what I want to do when you have no experience.'

His brow furrowed. 'How did you avoid sex, please tell me.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'No one really, you know.' Come to zero, only you. And you are a monster. 'Why are you so angry with me?' I whisper.

'I am not mad at you, I am mad at myself. I just assumed...' He sighs. He looks at me with insight then shakes his head. 'Do you want to go?' he asks, his voice soft.

'No, unless you want me to go,' I whisper. Oh no... I do not want to leave.

'Of course not. I like having you here.' He frowns as he says this, then glances at his watch. 'It's late.' And he turns to look at me. 'You bite your lip.' His voice is hoarse and he looks at me speculatively.

'Sorry.'

'Don't apologize. It is just that I want to bite too, hard.'

I gasp... how can he say things to me like that and not expect me to be affected.

'Come on,' he whispers. '

'What?'

'We will rectify the situation immediately.'

'What do you mean in this situation?'

'Your situation. Naddalin, I am going to make love to you now.'

'Oh.' The ground fell. I am in a situation. I hold my breath.

'It's if you want to, I mean, I don't want to take my chances.'

'I thought you had not had sex. I thought you had fucked hard.' I swallow, my mouth is suddenly dry.

He gives me a nasty smile, the effects of which travel there.

'I can make an exception, or combine the two, we will see. I really want to make love to you. Please come to bed with me. I want our arrangement to work, but you really have it. need to have an idea what you are getting yourself into. We can start your training tonight - with the basics. That does not mean I came with all my hearts and flowers, it is a means to an end, but the one I want, and I hope you do too.'

'His gray gaze is intense.

I blush... oh my... wishes come true.

'But I haven't done everything you demand from your rule list.' My voice is all panting, hesitant.

'Forget the rules. Forget all those details for tonight. I want you. I have wanted you ever since you fell in my office, and I know you want me. if you have not. Please, Naddalin, spend the night with me.' He holds out his hand to me, his eyes are bright, fervent... excited, and I put my hand in his. He pulls me up and into his arms so I can feel the length of his body against mine, this quick action took me by surprise. He

wraps his fingers around the back of his neck, wraps my ponytail around his wrist, and pulls gently so that I must look at him. He looks at me.

'You are a brave young woman,' he whispers. 'I am in awe of you.'

His words are like a incendiary device; my blood is on fire. He leans in and kisses my lips softly, and he sucks my bottom lip.

'I want to bite that lip,' he whispers against my mouth, and he pulls it gently with his teeth. I moan and he smiles.

'Please Naddalin let me make love to you.'

'Yes,' I whisper because that is what I am here for. His smile is triumphant as he releases me, takes my hand, and leads me through the apartment.

His room is large. High-ceiling windows overlook a high-rise, illuminated New York City.

The walls are white and the furniture is pale blue. The huge bed is ultra-modern, made from raw Maury wood, like driftwood, four posts, but no canopy. On the wall above there is a beautiful painting of the sea.

I tremble like a leaf. That is it. Finally, after all this time, I am going to do it, with none other than Grayson Maury. My breathing is shallow and I cannot take my eyes off him.

He takes off his watch and places it on a dresser that matches the bed, and takes off his jacket, setting it on a chair. He is dressed in his white linen shirt and jeans.

He is breathtakingly beautiful. His dark brassy hair is messy, his shirt hanging down - his daring bold gray eyes. He gets out of his Converse shoes and bends down and takes off his socks individually. Grayson Maury's feet... wow... what are bare feet Turning, he looks at me, his expression soft.

'I guess you're not on the pill.'

What! Shit.

'I didn't mean it.' He opens the top drawer of the safe and removes a package of condoms. He looks at me intently.

'Be prepared,' he whispers. 'Do you want the blinds drawn?'

'It does not bother me.' I whisper. 'I thought you didn't let anyone sleep in your bed.'

'Who said we're going to sleep?' he whispers.

'Oh.' Good heaven.

He walks slowly towards me. Confident, sexy, flaming eyes and my heart is pounding. My blood circulates in my body. The desire, thick and hot, flow in my stomach. He is standing in front of me, looking me in the eye. He is so hot.

'Let's take that jacket off, okay?' he said softly, he grabbed the lapels and gently slid my jacket off my shoulders. He places it on the chair.

'Do you have any idea what I want from you, Naddalin Black?' he whispers. My breathing is blocked. I cannot take my eyes off hers. He reaches out and gently runs his fingers down my cheek to my chin.

'Do you have any idea what I'm going to do to you?' he adds, stroking my chin.

The muscles inside the deepest, darkest part of me are contracting most deliciously.

The pain is so soft and sharp that I want to close my eyes, but I am mesmerized by her gray eyes which fervently fix mine. Leaning forward, he kisses me. Her lips are demanding, firm and slow, hugging mine. He begins to unbutton my shirt as he places feather-shaped kisses on my jaw, chin, and corners of my mouth. Slowly he pulls it away from me and drops it to the floor. He pulls back and looks at me. I am wearing the perfect pale blue lace bra.

Thank God.

'Oh, Naddalin,' he hisses. 'You have the most beautiful skin, pale and flawless. I want to kiss every inch of it.'

I rinse. Oh my... Why did he say he could not have sex, I will do whatever he wants.

He grabs my tie, pulls it off, and gasps as my hair cascades around my shoulders.

'I love brunettes,' he whispers, and both of his hands are in my hair, gripping either side of my head. His kiss is demanding, his tongue and lips attracting mine. I moan and my tongue timidly meets his. He puts his arms around me and pulls me against his body, hugging me tightly. One hand stays in my hair, the other goes down my spine to my waist and towards my behind. His hand flexes on my back and squeezes gently.

He squeezes me against his hips, and I feel his erection, which he sinks languidly into me.

I moaned once more into his mouth. I can barely contain the rioting emotions or is it the hormones raging through my body. I want it so badly. Gripping his arms, I feel his biceps, he is surprisingly strong... muscular. Tentatively, I move my hands to her face and through her hair. Saint Moses. It is so sweet, unruly. I pull gently and he moans.

He walks me over to the bed until I can feel him behind my knees. He is going to push me down, but he does not. Releasing me, he suddenly falls to his knees. He grabs my hips with both hands and runs his tongue around my belly button, then gently bites his way to my hip bone, then through my stomach to my other hip bone.

'Ah,' I moan.

Seeing him kneeling in front of me, feeling his mouth on me, it is so unexpected and hot. My hands stay in her hair, pulling gently as I try to calm my too-loud breathing.

He looks at me through impossibly long lashes, his eyes a burning smoky gray. His hands go up and undo the button of my jeans, and he quietly pulls the zipper down.

Without taking his eyes off mine, his hands move under the belt, brushing against me and moving towards my behind. His hands slowly slide down my back to my thighs, removing my jeans as I go. I cannot look away. He stops and licks his lips, never breaking eye contact. He leans forward, running his nose along the top between my thighs. I feel it.

'You smell so good,' he whispers and closes his eyes, a look of pure pleasure on his face, and I practically convulse. He reaches out and pulls the comforter off the bed, then gently pushes me so that I fall onto the mattress.

Still kneeling, he grabs my foot and undoes my Converse, removing my shoe and sock. I get up on my elbows to see what he is doing. I was panting... I wanted to. He lifts my foot by the heel and runs his sticker over my instep. It is almost painful, but I can feel the movement echoing in my groin. I gasp. Not taking his eyes off mine, he runs his tongue again along my instep and then his teeth. Shit. I moan... how can I feel that now. I fall back on the bed, moaning. I hear his little laugh.

'Oh, Naddalin, what could I do to you?' He whispers. He takes off my other shoes and socks, then gets up and takes off my jeans. I am lying on his bed, wearing only my bra and panties, and he looks at me.

'You are incredibly beautiful, Naddalin Black. I cannot wait to be inside of you.'

Holy shit. His words. He is so handsome. It takes my breath away.

'Show me how you like yourself.'

What I am frowning about.

'Don't be shy, Naddalin, show me,' he whispers.

I shake my head.

'I don't know what you mean.' My voice is hoarse. I barely recognize him, full of desire.

'How you make yourself cum, I want to see.'

I shake my head.

'No,' I mumble. He raises his eyebrows, astonished for a moment, and his eyes darken, and he shakes his head in disbelief.

'Well, we'll have to see what we can do about it.' Her voice is soft, provocative, a delicious sensual threat. He undoes the buttons on his jeans and gently pulls his jeans down, his eyes on mine the whole time. He leans over me and, grabbing

each of my ankles, quickly spreads my legs and crawls on the bed between my legs. It hovers above me. I squirm in need.

'Stay still,' he whispers, then leans in and kisses the inside of my thigh, dragging kisses across the thin lace of my panties, kissing me.

Oh... I cannot be quiet. How not to move, I squirm under him.

'We're going to have to work to keep you quiet, baby.' He trails kisses on my stomach and his tongue plunges into my navel. He is still heading north, kissing me on my chest.

My skin is burning. I blushed, too hot, too cold, and I scratched the sheet under me. He is laid down next to me and his hand moves up from my hip to my waist and chest. He looks at me, his expression is unreadable, and gently takes my chest.

'You fit my hand perfectly, Naddalin,' he whispers and plunges his index finger into the cup of my bra and gently pulls it down to free my chest, but the yarn and fabric of the cup push it up. Her finger moves to my other breast and repeats the process. My breasts swell, and my nipples harden under his gaze. I am tied up by my bra. 'Very pretty,' he whispers appreciatively, and my nipples harden even more.

He blows very gently on one as his hand moves to my other breast, and his thumb slowly rolls the end of my nipple, lengthening it. I moaned, feeling the sweet sensation even in my groin. I am so moldy. Oh please, I beg inwardly as my fingers grip the sheet more firmly. His lips close around my other nipple and he pulls, I almost convulse.

'Let's see if we can make you cum like this,' he whispers, continuing his slow and sultry assault. My nipples carry the delicious weight of her skillful fingers and lips, igniting every nerve ending in my body so that my whole body sings with sweet agony.

It just does not stop.

'Oh... please,' I beg you, and I pull my head back, my mouth open as I moan, my legs stiffen. What is going on with me?

'Let go, baby,' he whispers. His teeth close around my nipple, and his thumb and finger pull hard, and I collapse into his hands, my body twitching and

shattering into pieces. He kisses me deeply, his tongue in my mouth absorbing my cries.

Oh my. It was extraordinary. Now I know what it is. He looks at me, a satisfied smile on his face when I am sure there is nothing but gratitude and awe on mine.

'You are very responsive,' he breathes. 'You're going to have to learn to control this, and it's going to be so much fun teaching you how.' He kisses me again.

My breathing is still irregular as I descend from my orgasm. His hand goes down my waist, to my hips, then squeezes me tightly... Jeez. Her finger slides through the delicate lace and slowly turns around me - there. He briefly closes his eyes and his breathing stops.

'You are so deliciously wet. My God, I want you.' He sticks his finger inside me, and I scream as he does it repeatedly. He palms my clit and I scream once more. He pushes me harder and harder. I moan.

Suddenly he sits up and takes my panties off and throws them on the floor. By removing his underwear, his erection is released. Holy cow... He reaches for his bedside table and grabs a bundle of foil, then moves between my legs, spreading them further.

He kneels and puts on a condom along its considerable length. Oh no... does he want how.

'Don't worry,' he breathes, his mine eyes, 'You are developing too.' He leans down, his hands on either side of my head, so he hovers above me, looking me in the eye, jaw clenched, eyes burning. It is only now that I sign up that he is still wearing his shirt.

'Do you really want to do this?' he asks softly.

'Please,' I beg you.

'Roll up your knees,' he orders softly, and I am quick to obey. 'I'm going to fuck you now, Miss Black,' he whispered, positioning the head of his erection at the entrance to my cock. 'Hard,' he whispers and hits me.

'Aargh! I cry as I feel a strange pinching sensation deep inside me as he tears my virginity apart. He freezes, looking at me, his eyes shining with ecstatic triumph.

Her mouth is slightly open and her breathing is rough. He moans.

'You are so tight. Are you okay?'

I nod, my eyes were wide, my hands on his forearms. I feel so full. He stays still, letting me acclimate to the intrusive and overwhelming feeling of him inside me.

'I'm going to move, baby,' he breathes after a moment, his voice tight.

Oh.

He relaxes with exquisite slowness. And he closes his eyes and moans and sinks into me again. I scream a second time and he stops.

'After?' he whispers, his voice harsh.

'Yes,' I breathe. He does it once more and comes to a stop again.

I moan. My body accepted it... Oh, I want this.

'Again?' he breathes.

'Yes.' It is a plea.

-And-

Then he moves, but this time he does not stop. He gets up on his elbows so I can feel his weight on me, holding me back. He moves slowly at first, settling in and out of me. And as I get used to the alien feel, my hips tentatively move to meet hers.

He accelerates. I moan, and he hammers, accelerating, mercilessly, an unrelenting rhythm, and I continue, responding to his punches. He grabs my head in his hands and kisses me hard, his teeth pulling against my lower lip again. He moves slightly and I can feel something building up deep inside me, just like before. I start to stiffen as he pushes repeatedly. My body shudders tilt, a gleam of sweat accumulates on me. Oh my... I did not know it would feel like this... I did not know it could feel that good. My thoughts are dispersing... there is only the feeling... only him... only me... oh please... I stiffen.

'Come for me, Naddalin,' he whispers breathlessly, and I untangle myself at his words, exploding around him as I cum and shatter into a million pieces beneath him. And as he comes, he screams my name, pushing hard, then flies, emptying himself into me.

I am still panting, trying to slow my breathing down, my heart pounding, and my thoughts are in turmoil. Wow... that was amazing. I open my eyes and he has his forehead pressed against mine, eyes closed, breathing irregularly. Grayson's eyes open and look at me, dark but soft. He is still in me. Leaning down, he gently presses a kiss against my forehead and then gently pulls away from me.

'Ooh.' I wince at the ignorance.

'Did I hurt you?' Grayson asks as he lies down next to me, propped up on one elbow. He tucks a section of my hair behind my ear. And I must smile broadly.

'Are you asking me if you hurt me?'

'The iroPittsburgh is not lost on me,' he smiles Naddalindonically. 'Seriously, are you okay?' His eyes are intense, sounding, demanding even.

I lay down beside him, feeling my limbs lose, my bones like jelly, but I am relaxed, deeply relaxed. I smile at him. I cannot stop smiling. Now I know what it is.

Four orgasms... parting at the seams, like the spin cycle on a washing machine, wow.

I had no idea what my body was capable of, could be hurt so tightly and released so violently, so rewarding. The pleasure was indescribable.

'You bite your lip, and you haven't answered me.' He frowns. I smirked at him playfully. He looks glorious with his tousled hair, searing shrunken gray eyes, and serious dark expression.

'I'd love to do that again,' I whisper. For a moment, I see a slight relief on his face before the shutters come down, and he looks at me through hooded eyes.

'Would you like now, Miss Black?' he whispers dryly. He leans in and kisses me very softly at the corner of my mouth. 'The demanding trivial things are not you. Light up your forehead.'

I blink at him momentarily, then turn around. He unhooked my bra and ran his hand down my back to my behind.

'You really have the best skin,' he whispers. He moves so that one of his legs pushes between mine, and he is half-lying on my back. I can feel the buttons of his shirt press against me as he picks up my hair over my face and kisses my bare shoulder.

'Why are you wearing your shirt?' I ask. He stops moving. After a while, he pulls out of his shirt and lies back on top of me. I feel her warm skin against mine. Hmm... it is divine. He has a thin layer of hair on his chest, which tickles my back.

'So you want me to fuck you again?' it whispers in my ear, and it starts dragging feather-light kisses around my ear and down my neck.

His hand moves down, brushing my waist, over my hip and thigh to the back of my knee. He pushes my knee higher, and my breathing locks in... oh my God, what is he doing now? He moves so he is between my legs, pressed against my back, and his hand goes up my thigh to my behind. He slowly strokes my cheek, then slides his fingers between my legs.

'I'll take you from behind, Naddalin,' he whispers, and with his other hand, he grabs my hair at the back of my neck in a fist and pulls it gently, holding me in place. I cannot move my head. I am stuck under him, helpless.

'You are mine,' he whispers. 'Only mine. Do not forget that.' Her voice is intoxicating, her words heady, seductive. I feel his growing erection against my thigh.

Her long fingers reach round to gently massage my clit, slowly rotating. His breath is soft against my face as he slowly pinches me along my jaw.

'You smell divine,' he snuggled up behind my ear. Her hand rubs against me, round, and round. Reflexively, my hips start to spin, reflecting his hand, as excruciating pleasure rushes through my blood like adrenaline.

'Stay still,' he orders, his voice soft but urgent, and slowly he inserts his thumb inside me, spinning it around, stroking the front wall of my vagina. The effect is breathtaking - all my energy is focused on this small space inside my body. I moan.

'You like this?' He asks softly, his teeth brushing against my outer ear, and he begins to slowly flex his thumb, in, out, in, out... his fingers are still spinning.

I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the messy, chaotic sensations his fingers are unleashing on me, fire roaming my body. I moan again.

'You're so wet, so fast. So responsive. Oh, Naddalin, I like it. I really like it.'

~*~

And.. he whispers.

I want to stiffen my legs, but I cannot move. He pins me, maintains a constant, slow, and torturous rhythm. It is exquisite. I moan again and he suddenly moves.

'Open your mouth,' he orders and sticks his thumb in my mouth. My eyes open, blinking wildly.

'See how you taste,' he hisses against my ear. 'Suck me, baby.' His thumb presses on my tongue, and my mouth closes around him, sucking wildly. I taste the salinity of his thumb and the slight metallic flavor of blood. Holy shit. This is wrong, but hell is it erotic.

'I want to kiss your mouth, Naddalin, and I will soon.' His voice is hoarse, raw, his breathing more disjointed.

Fuck my mouth! I moan and bite him. He gasps, and he squeezes my hair tighter, painfully, so I let him go.

'Naughty, nice girl,' he whispers, then reaches for the bedside table for a sachet of foil. 'Stay still, don't move,' he orders, releasing my hair.

He tears the sheet apart as I breathe hard, my blood singing through my veins. The anticipation is exhilarating. He leans over, his weight on me again, and he grabs my hair, holding my head still. I can not move. I am attracted to him, and he is ready to take me back.

'We're going to go really, slowly this time, Naddalin,' he hisses.

-And-

Slowly it enters me until it is buried in me. Stretch, fill, relentless. I moan loudly. It is deeper this time, delicious. I moan again, and he deliberately circles his hips and pulls back, pauses, then comes back easily.

He repeats this movement repeatedly. It drives me crazy - it is teasing, deliberately slow thrusts, and the intermittent feeling of fullness are overwhelming.

'You feel so-o good,' he moans, and my insides start to shake. He backs up and waits.

'Oh no, baby, not yet,' he whispers, and as the thrill ceases, he begins the whole delicious process again.

'Oh, please,' I beg you. I am not sure I can take much more. My body is so tight, eager to break free.

'I want you to hurt, baby,' he whispers, and continues his gentle torment, back, forward.

'Every time you move tomorrow, I want to be reminded that I've been here.' Just me. You are mine.

I moan.

'Please, Grayson,' I whisper.

'What do you want, Naddalin, tell me.'

I moan again. He pulls back and slowly comes back inside me, circling his hips again.

'Tell me,' he whispers.

'You, please.'

He increases the pace endlessly and his breathing becomes more erratic. My insides start to speed up and Grayson picks up the pace.

'You. Are. So. Sweet,' he mutters between each thrust. 'I want you so much.'

I moan.

'You. Are. Mine. Come for me, baby,' he growls.

His words are my downfall, knocking me over the precipice. My body convulses around him, and I come, loudly shouting a distorted version of his name into the mattress, and Grayson follows him with two sudden thrusts, and he freezes, pouring into me as he finds his release. He collapses on top of me, his face in my hair.

'Damn. Naddalin,' he hisses. He immediately gets out of me and rolls onto the side of the bed. I pull my knees to my chest, completely exhausted, and immediately drift or pass out in exhausted sleep.

When- I wake up it is still dark. I have no idea how long I slept. I stretch out under the duvet and feel sore, deliciously sore. Grayson cannot be found. I sit down, looking at the cityscape in front of me. There are fewer lights on among the skyscrapers, and there is a whisper of dawn in the east. I hear the music. The melodious notes of the piano, a sad and sweet lament. Bach, I think, but I am not sure.

I wrap the quilt around myself and quietly walk down the hall to the large room.

Grayson is at the piano, completely lost in the music he is playing. His expression is sad and desperate, like music. His game is breathtaking. Leaning against the wall at the entrance, I listen delighted. He is such an accomplished musician. He sits naked, his body bathed in the warm light cast by a solitary floor lamp beside the piano. With the rest of the large room in the dark, it is like he is in his own lonely, touchable... lonely little puddle of light, in a bubble.

I walk quietly towards him, attracted by the sublime and melancholy music. I am fascinated to watch his long, skillful fingers as they find and gently press down on the keys, thinking about how those same fingers expertly manipulated and caressed my body. I blush and gasp at the memory and press my thighs together. He looks up, his unfathomable gray eyes shining, his expression unreadable.

'Sorry,' I whisper. 'I didn't mean to disturb you.'

A frown crosses his face.

'Sure, I should tell you that,' he whispers. He finishes playing and puts his hands on his legs.

I now notice he is wearing pajama pants. He runs his fingers through his hair and stands up.

His pants hang down from his hips, that way... oh my there. My mouth goes dry as he casually walks around the piano towards me. He has broad shoulders, narrow hips, and his abdominal muscles ripple as he walks. He is truly magnificent.

'You should be in bed,' he warns.

'It was a beautiful play. Bach?'

'Transcribed by Bach, but originally an oboe concerto by Alessandro Marcello.'

'It was exquisite, but very sad, such a melancholy melody.'

His lips curl up in a half-smile.

'Bed,' he orders. 'You will be exhausted in the morning.'

'I woke up and you weren't there.'

'I have trouble sleeping and I'm not used to sleeping with anyone,' he whispers. I cannot understand his mood. He seems a little disheartened, but it is hard to tell in the dark. That was the tone of the song he was playing. He puts his arm around me and slowly leads me back to the bedroom.

'How long have you been playing? You play beautifully.'

'Since I was six years old.'

'Oh.' Grayson as a six-year-old boy... my mind conjures up an image of a handsome little boy with brassy hair with gray eyes and my heart melts - a moppet-haired child who enjoys incredibly sad music.

'How are you?' he asks when we are back in the room. He lights night light.

'I'm fine.'

We both look at the bed at the same time. There is blood on the sheets - proof of my lost virginity I am only 16. I blush, embarrassed, pulling the quilt tight around me.

'Well, that'll give Mrs. Jones something to think about,' Grayson mutters as he stands in front of me. He puts his hand under my chin and tilts my head back, staring at me. His eyes are intense as he examines my face. I realize that I have never seen his bare chest before. Instinctively, I reach out to run my fingers through the fistful of dark hair on his chest to see what it feels like. Immediately, he pulls back out of my reach.

~*~

'Go to bed,' he said sharply. 'I'll come and sleep with you.' Her voice softens.

I drop my hand and frown. I do not think I ever touched his chest. He opens a dresser, pulls out a t-shirt, and quickly puts it on.

'Bed,' he orders again. I climb back onto the bed, trying not to think of the blood.

He climbs up beside me and pulls me into his embrace, wrapping his arms around me so that I turn away from him. He gently kisses my hair and takes a deep breath.

'Sleep, sweet Naddalin,' he whispers, and I close my eyes, but I cannot help but feel a residual melancholy due to the music or her behavior. Grayson Maury has a sad side.

Light fills the room, making me go from deep sleep to awake. I stretch and open my eyes. It is a beautiful morning in May, New York at my feet. Wow, what a view. Beside me, Grayson Maury is sleeping soundly. Wow, what a view. I am surprised he is still in bed. He faces me and I have an unprecedented opportunity to study him. Her pretty face looks younger, relaxed in sleep. Her sculpted, pouty lips are slightly parted, and shy, clean hair is a glorious mess. How could someone look so good-looking and still be legal? I remember his upstairs bedroom... it is not legal. I shake my head, so much to think about. It is tempting to reach out and touch it, but as a little child, he is so adorable when he is sleeping. I do not have to worry about what I say, what he says, what plans he has, especially his plans for me.

I could watch it all day, but I have needs - bathroom needs. As I slide out of bed, I find his white shirt on the floor and pull it on. I walk through a door, thinking it might be the bathroom, but I am in a huge walk-in closet as big as my bedroom. Lines and lines of expensive suits, shirts, shoes, and ties. How can anyone need so many

clothes that I disapprove of? Maury's wardrobe rivals that. Maury! Oh no. I have not thought about her all evening. I was supposed to text him. Shit. I am going to be in trouble. I briefly wonder how she has a good relationship with Jack.

Back in the bedroom, Grayson is still sleeping. I try the other door. It is the bathroom, and it is bigger than my bedroom. Why does a man need so much space? Two sinks, I note with irony. Since he is not sleeping with anyone, one of them cannot have been used.

I look at myself in the gigantic mirror above the sinks. Do I look different? I feel different. I feel a little sore, if I am being honest, and my muscles - damn it, it is like I have never exercised in my life. You do not do any exercise in your life, my subconscious has awakened.

She looks at me with pursed lips, patting her foot. So you just slept with him, you gave him your virginity, a man who does not love you. He has some very weird ideas about you, wants to make you kinky sex slave.

ARE YOU CRAZY She yells at me.

I grimace, looking at myself in the mirror. I will have to deal with all of this. Honestly, I want to fall in love with a man who is beyond handsome, richer than Croesus, and who has a red room of pain waiting for me. I am shivering. I am bewildered and confused. My hair is as usual finicky. Just kissed hair does not suit me. I try to tidy up the chaos with my fingers but fail miserably and give up - I will find some hair ties in my purse.

I am starving. I go back to the bedroom. Sleeping Beauty is still sleeping, so I leave him and head for the kitchen.

Oh no... Maury. I left my purse in Grayson's office. I get him and grab my cell phone. Three texts.

~ RU OK Naddalin ~

~ Where RU Naddalin ~

~ Damn Naddalin ~

I am calling Maury. When she does not respond, I leave her a creepy message to tell her that I am alive and have not succumbed to Bluebeard, well not in

the sense that she would be worried - or I would. have done. Oh, this is so confusing. I must try to categorize and analyze my feelings for Grayson Maury. It is an impossible task. I shake my head in defeat. I need time alone, far from here to think.

I find two hair ties at the same time in my bag and quickly tie my hair into pigtails. Yes! The more girly I look, the safer I will be from Bluebeard. I take my iPod out of the bag and plug in my headphones. There is nothing like music for cooking. I slip it into Grayson's breast pocket, pull it up hard, and start dancing.

Damn, I am hungry.

I am intimidated by his cooking. It is so sleek and modern and none of the closets have handles. It takes a few seconds for me to figure out that I must push the cupboard doors open to open them. I should make breakfast for Grayson. He was having an omelet the other day... uh, yesterday at the Heathman. Hell, so much has happened since then. I check the fridge, where there are plenty of eggs, and decide I want some pancakes and bacon. I started to make dough while dancing in the kitchen.

Being busy is good. This leaves a little time to think, but not too deeply. Music ringing in my ears also helps to avoid deep thinking. I came here to spend the night in Grayson's bed, Maury, and I got that done, although he did not leave anyone in his bed. I smile, mission accomplished. Highlights. I smile. Big, big time, and I am distracted by the memory of last night. His words, his body, his antics... I close my eyes as my body buzzes at the memory, and my muscles contract deliciously deep in my stomach. My subconscious is watching me... damn - no love - she screams at me like a harpy. I do not know, but deep down I know she is right. I shake my head to focus on the task at hand.

There is a range at the forefront of technology. I got it. I need a place to keep the pancakes warm, and I am starting with the bacon. Amy Studt sings in the ear of the misfits. This song meant so much to me, it is because I am a misfit. I have never moved anywhere and now... I have an indecent proposal to consider from King Misfit himself. Why is it so Nature or Nurture He's so alien to all I know?

I put the bacon under the grill and while cooking I whisk eggs. I turn around and Grayson is sitting on one of the stools in the breakfast bar, leaning against it, his face propped up by his crossed hands. He still wears the t-shirt he slept in. The just-kissed hair fits her, as does her designer stubble. He looks both amused and bewildered.

I freeze, blush, then pull myself together and pull the headphones out of my ears, knees weak at the sight of it.

'Hello, Miss Black. You are very energetic this morning,' he said dryly.

'I slept well,' I stammered. His lips try to hide his smile.

'I can't imagine why.' He stops and frowns. 'Me too, after coming back to bed.'

'You are hungry?'

'Very,' he says with an intense gaze, and I do not think he is referring to the food.

'Pancakes, bacon and eggs?'

'Great.'

'I don't know where you keep your placemats.' I shrug, desperately trying not to sound upset.

'I will do that. You are cooking. Would you like me to put some music on so you can continue your... uh... dancing?'

I look at my fingers, knowing that I am going to be a chip.

'Please do not stop at my account. It is a lot of fun.' Its tone is that of ironic amusement.

I tighten my lips. funny eh My subconscious laughed at me.

I turn around and continue to whisk the eggs, beating them a little harder than necessary.

In a moment he is beside me. He gently pulls my pigtail.

'I love it,' he whispers. 'They won't protect you.' Hmm, Blue Beard...

'How would you like your eggs?' I ask sharply. He smiles.

'Well whipped and beaten,' he smiles.

I return to the task at hand, trying to hide my smile. It is hard to stay angry. Especially when he is so playful in an unusual way. He opens a drawer and takes out two black slate placemats for the breakfast bar. I pour the egg mixture into a saucepan, take out the bacon, turn it over, and put it back under the grill.

When I turn around, there's orange juice on the table and he is making coffee.

'Would you like some tea?'

'Yes, please. If you have any.'

I find a few plates and place them on the hot plate of the stove. Grayson reaches into a cupboard and pulls out some Twinings English Breakfast tea. I tighten my lips.

'A little early, isn't it?'

'Are you, I'm not sure we've concluded anything yet, Miss Black,' he whispers.

What does he mean by that Our negotiations Our, uh... relationship... anyway, He's still so cryptic. I serve breakfast on heated plates and place them on the placemats. I hunt in the refrigerator and find maple syrup.

I look at Grayson and he waits for me to sit down.

'Miss Black'. He waves to one of the bar stools.

'Mr. Maury. I nod my head. I go upstairs and wince slightly as I sit down.

'How sore are you?' he asks, sitting down. His dark gray eyes.

I rinse. Why does he ask such personal questions?

'Well, to be honest, I have nothing to compare to that,' I told him. 'Did you want to offer your commiserations?' I ask too nicely. He is trying to stifle a smile, but I cannot be sure.

'No. I wondered if we should continue your basic training.'

'Oh.' I watch him dumbfounded as I stop breathing and everything inside me tightens. Ooh... that is so sweet. I suppress my moan.

'Eat, Naddalin. My appetite became uncertain again... more... more sex... yes, please.'

'It's delicious.' He smiles at me.

I tried an omelet fork but can barely taste it. Basic training! I want to kiss your mouth. Is this part of the basic training?

'Stop biting your lip. It is very distracting, and I know you are not wearing anything under my shirt, which makes it even more distracting,' he growls.

I dipped my tea bag in the small pot provided by Grayson. My mind is in a whirlwind.

'What kind of basic training did you have in mind?' I ask, my voice slightly too loud, betraying my desire to appear as natural, selfless, and calm as possible with my hormones wreaking havoc on my body.

'Well, since you are hurting, I thought we could stick to speaking skills.'

I choke on my tea and look at him, my eyes were wide and gaping. He patted me gently on the back and passed me some orange juice. I cannot say what he is thinking.

'That's if you want to stay,' he adds. I watch him, trying to regain my balance. His expression is illegible. It is so frustrating.

'I would like to stay for today. If it is okay. I must work tomorrow.'

'What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?'

'New.'

'I'll put you to work at nine tomorrow.'

I frown. Does he want me to stay another night?

'I'm going to have to go home tonight - I need clean clothes.'

'We can get some here for you.'

I have no money to spend on clothes. His hand raises and he grabs my chin, pulling it so that my lip is free from the grip of my teeth. I do not even know I bit my lip.

'What is that?' he asks.

'I need to be home tonight.'

His mouth is a hard line.

'Alright, tonight,' he nods. 'Now have your breakfast.'

My thoughts and my stomach are in turmoil. My appetite is gone. I watch my half-eaten breakfast. I am just not hungry.

'Eat, Naddalin. You did not eat last night.'

'I'm really not hungry,' I whisper.

His eyes narrow.

'I would really like you to finish your breakfast.'

'What's with you and the food?' I let it slip. His forehead crumples.

'I told you, I have problems with wasted food. Eat,' he snaps. His eyes are dark, painful.

Holy Crap. What is it about? I take my fork and eat slowly, trying to chew.

I must remember not to put that much on my plate if he is going to be weird about the food. His expression softens as I carefully work my way into my breakfast. I see he is cleaning his plate. He waits for me to finish, then he clears my plate.

'You cooked, I will clarify.'

'It's very democratic.'

'Yes.' He frowns. 'It is not my usual style. After doing this, we will take a bath.'

'Oh okay.' Oh my... I much prefer to take a shower. My cell phone rings, interrupting my reverie. It is Maury.

'Hi.' I wander towards the glass doors of the balcoPittsburgh, far from him.

'Naddalin, why didn't you text last night?' She is angry.

'I'm sorry, I was overwhelmed by events.'

'You're okay?'

'Yes I'm fine.'

'Do you have?' She is looking for information. I roll my eyes at the expectation of his voice.

'Maury, I don't want to talk on the phone.' Grayson looks at me.

'You did... I can say it.'

How can she tell she is bluffing, and I cannot talk about it. I signed a damn deal.

'Maury, please.'

'How were you doing?'

'I told you I'm fine.'

'Was he nice?

'Maury, please! I cannot hide my exasperation.'

'Naddalin, don't hold me up, I've been waiting for this day for almost four years.'

'I'll see you tonight.' I am hanging up.

It will be a difficult square to circle. She is so stubborn, and she wants to know - in detail, and I cannot tell her because I signed one - what it was called NDA.

She will panic and rightly so. I need a plan. I return to watch Grayson move, Billie, fully around his kitchen.

'Does the NDA cover everything?' I ask shyly.

'Why?' he turns and looks at me while putting the Twinings away. I rinse.

'Well, I have a few questions, you know, about sex.' I look at my fingers.

'And I would like to ask Maury.'

'You can ask me.'

'Grayson, with all due respect. My voice fades. I cannot ask you. I am going to have your biased, kinky as hell, warped worldview regarding sex. I want an unbiased opinion. It is just a matter of mechanics. I will not mention the Red Room of Pain.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'The red paint room is all about pleasure, Naddalin. Believe me,' he says.

'Besides,' his tone is harsher. 'Your roommate is making the two-backed beast with my brother. I would really prefer you did not.'

'Does your family know about your... uh predilection?'

'No. It is none of their business.' He walks towards me until he is standing in front of me.

'What do you want to know?' he asks and raising his hand, his fingers along my cheek to my chin, tilting his head back so he can look directly into my eyes. I squirm inside. I cannot lie to this man.

'Nothing specific yet,' I whisper.

'Well, we can start with - how was last night for you?' Her eyes burn, filled with curiosity. He cannot wait to know.

~*~

Wow.

'Good,' I whisper.

Her lips lift slightly.

'Me too,' he whispers. 'I have never had vanilla sex before. There is a lot to say about it. But then, it is because it is with you.' He runs his thumb over my lower lip.

I breathe in sharply. Vanilla sex?

'Come on, let us take a bath. He leans in and kisses me. My heart leaps and longs for pools exceptionally low... there.'

The bath is a white stone, deep, egg-shaped, very designed. Grayson bends down and fills it from the tap on the tiled wall. He pours expensive bath oil into the water. It foams as the bath fills up and smells of sweet and sensual jasmine. He stands up and looks at me, his eyes dark, then peels off his shirt and throws it on the floor.

'Miss Black'. He holds out his hand.

I stand on the doorstep, wide-eyed and suspicious, my arms wrapped around me. I move forward while surreptitiously admiring his physique. It is just delicious. My subconscious passed out and passed out somewhere behind my head. I take his hand and he invites me into the bath while I am still wearing his shirt. I do what I am told. I am going to have to get used to it if I am going to accept him for his outrageous offer... yes! The water is extremely hot.

'Turn around, face me,' he orders, his voice soft. I do what I suggest. He looks at me intently.

'I know that lip is delicious, I can attest to that, but are you going to stop biting it?' he said through clenched teeth. 'You chew it makes me want to fuck you, and you're in pain, okay?'

I gasp, automatically unlocking my lip, shocked.

'Yeah,' he challenges. 'I have the picture.' He looks at me. I nod frantically. I had no idea I could affect him like that.

'Good.' He reaches out and pulls my iPod out of the chest pocket and puts it near the sink.

'Water and iPods - not a smart combination,' he mumbles. He bends down, grabs the hem of my white shirt, lifts it over my head, and throws it to the floor.

He pulls back to look at me. I am naked for heaven's sake. I blush from crimson and gaze at my hands, at the base of my stomach, and desperately want to disappear into the hot water and suds, but I know he will not.

'Hey,' he summons me. I look at him and his head is tilted to the side. 'Naddalin, you are an incredibly beautiful woman, the whole package. Do not hang your head like you are ashamed. You do not have to be ashamed, and it is a real joy to stay here and watch you. He takes my chin in his hand and tilts my head to reach his eyes. They are soft and warm, even heated. Oh my. He is so close. I could just reach out and touch him.

'You can sit down now.' He stops my scattered thoughts and I rush into the warm, welcoming water. Ooh... it stings. This takes me by surprise, but it smells like heaven too, and the initial tingling pain quickly goes away. I lie back and briefly close my eyes, relaxing in the soothing heat. When I open them, he looks at me.

'Why don't you join me?' I ask, bravely I think - my hoarse voice.

'I think I will. Come on,' he orders.

He undresses his pajama pants and climbs up behind me. The water rises as he sits up and pulls me against his chest. He places his long legs on mine, his knees bent and his ankles level with mine, and he spreads his feet, opening my legs. I gasp in surprise. His nose is in my hair and he is breathing deeply.

'You smell so good, Naddalin.'

A tremor runs through my whole body. I am naked, in a bath with Grayson Maury.

He is naked. If someone had told me I would do this when I woke up in their hotel suite yesterday, I would not have believed them.

He takes a bottle of shower gel from the built-in shelf next to the tub and throws it into his hand. He rubs his hands together, creating a soft, lathering lather, and he closes his hands around my neck and begins rubbing the soap into my neck and shoulders, massaging firmly with his long, powerful fingers. I moan. His hands-on me makes me feel good.

'You like this?' I hear his smile.

'Hmm.'

He goes down my arms, then under them to my armpits, washing gently. I am so glad Maury insisted that I shave. Her hands slide over my breasts, and I inhale sharply as her fingers encircle them and begin to gently knead, taking no prisoners. My body instinctively tilts, pushing my breasts into her hands. My nipples are tender. Very tender, no doubt from his less than delicate treatment last night. He does not linger for long and slides his hands over my stomach and stomach. My breathing is increasing and my heart is racing. His growing erection pressed against my butt. It is so exciting to know that it is my body that makes it feel that way. Ha... not your mind. My subconscious sneers. I shake off this unwanted thought.

He stops and grabs a washcloth as I gasp against him, wanting... to need. My hands are resting on her firm, muscular thighs. Squirting more soap on the washcloth, he bends down and washes between my legs. I hold my breath. His fingers skillfully stimulate me through the fabric, it is heavenly, and my hips start to move at their own pace, pushing against his hand. As the sensations take hold, I tilt my head back, my eyes rolling to the back of my head, my mouth released, and I moan. The pressure builds slowly, inexorably in me... oh there.

'Feel it, baby,' Grayson whispers in my ear and very gently rubs my earlobe with his teeth. 'Feel it for me.' My legs are pinned by hers to the side of the tub, holding me captive, giving her easy access to this most private part of me.

'Oh... please,' I whisper. I try to stiffen my legs as my body stiffens. I am under the sexual influence of this man and he will not let me move.

'I think you're pretty clean now,' he whispers and stops. What! No! No! No!

My breathing is irregular.

'Why are you stopping?' I gasp.

'Because I have other plans for you Naddalin.'

What... oh my... but... I was... that is not fair.

'Turn around. I need to wash myself too,' he whispers.

Oh! Turning to face him, I am shocked to find that he has his erection firmly in his hands.

My mouth opens.

'I want you to get to know me well, in terms of first name if you will, with my favorite and Dearest part of my body.' I am overly attached to it.

It is so big and growing. His erection is above the waterline, the water lapping over his hips. I look at him and find myself face to face with his nasty smile. He appreciates my stunned expression. I realize that I am watching. I swallow. It was in me! It does not seem possible. He wants me to touch him. Hmm... okay, bring him.

I smile at her and grab the shower gel, throwing the soap on my hand. I do what he did, lathering the soap into my hands until they are frothy. I do not take my eyes off him. My lips are parted to accommodate my breathing... very deliberately, I gently bite my lower lip, then run my tongue over it, tracing where my teeth were. Her eyes are serious and dark, and they widen as my tongue brushes my lower lip. I reach out and place one of my hands around him, mirroring the way he holds himself. Her eyes close briefly. Wow... feels a lot firmer than I expected. I squeeze, and he places his hand on mine. 'Like that,' he whispers, and he moves his hand up and down with a firm grip around my fingers, and my fingers tighten around him. He closes his eyes again and his breath hangs in his throat. When he opens them again, his gaze is a burning gray fade. 'That's right baby.'

He lets go of my hand, letting me continue my own, and closes his eyes as I move up and down his length. He flexes his hips slightly in my hand and by reflex, I squeeze him tighter. A low growl escapes from deep in his throat. Fuck my mouth... hmm. I remember putting his thumb in my mouth and asking me to suck hard. Her mouth opens slightly as her breathing increases. I lean forward, while his eyes are closed, and place my lips around him and suck tentatively, running my tongue over the tip.

'Whoa... Naddalin.' Her eyes open and I suck harder.

Hmm... it is soft and hard at the same time, like velvet-covered steel, and surprisingly tasty - salty and smooth.

'Damn it,' he moans and closes his eyes again.

On the way down, I push it into my mouth. He moaned again. Ha! My inner goddess is delighted. I can do it. I can fuck it with my mouth. I wrap my tongue around the tip again, and he flexes his hips. Her eyes are open now, swelling with warmth. His

teeth are clenched as he flexes again, and I push him deeper into my mouth, supporting myself on his thighs. His legs tighten under my hands. He reaches out and grabs my pigtails and starts to move.

'Oh... baby... that feels good,' he whispers. I suck harder, running my tongue over the head of his impressive erection. Curling my teeth behind my lips, I tighten my mouth around him. His breath hisses between his teeth and he moans.

'Jesus. How far can you go?' He whispers.

Hmm... I pull it deeper into my mouth so I can feel it deep in my throat and then forward again. My tongue swirls towards the end. This is my very own Grayson Maury-flavored popsicle. I suck harder and harder, pushing him deeper and deeper, spinning my tongue increasingly. Hmm... I had no idea that giving pleasure could be such arousal, watching him twist subtly with carnal lust. My inner goddess does the merengue with a few movements of salsa.

'Naddalin, I'm going to come into your mouth,' her panting tone is a warning. 'If you don't want it, stop now.' He flexes his hips again, his eyes wide, suspicious, and filled with a salacious need - need me. Need my mouth... oh la la!

Holy shit. His hands are gripping my hair. I can do it. I push even harder and, in a moment of extraordinary confidence, I bar my teeth. This tilts it over the edge.

He screams and freezes, and I can feel a hot, salty liquid oozing down my throat. I swallow quickly. Ugh... I am not sure. But one look at him, and he fell apart in the tub because of me, and I did not care. I sit down and watch him, a triumphant, jubilant smile drawing to the corner of my lips. His breathing is irregular. Opening his eyes, he looks at me. 'Don't you gag reflex?' he asks, astonished. 'Damn, Naddalin... it was... good, really good, unexpected though.' He frowns. 'You know, you never cease to amaze me.'

I smile and consciously bite my lip. He looks at me speculatively.

'Have you ever done this?'

'No.' And I cannot help the little tinge of pride in my denial.

'Good,' he said complacently and, I think, relieved. 'Yet another first, Miss Black.'

He looks at me with appreciation. 'Well you get an A in speaking skills. Come on, let us go to bed, I owe you an orgasm.'

Orgasm! Another!

Quickly, he climbs out of the tub, giving me my first full glimpse of the divinely formed Adonis, ie Grayson Maury. My inner goddess has stopped dancing and is watching too, her mouth open and drooling slightly. His tame erection, but still substantial... wow. He wraps a small towel around his waist, covering most of the essentials, and hands me a larger, fluffy white towel. Coming out of the bath, I take his outstretched hand. He wraps me in the towel, hugs me, and kisses me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth.

I cannot wait to reach out and kiss him... touch him... but he has my arms trapped in the towel. I am soon lost in his kiss. He cradles my head, his tongue explores my mouth, and I feel like he is expressing gratitude for my first blowjob.

He pulls away, his hands on either side of my face, staring intently into my eyes. He looks lost.

'Say yes,' he whispers fervently.

I frown, not understanding.

'To what?'

'Yes to our arrangement. Be mine. Please, Naddalin,' he whispered, underlining the last word and my name, pleading. He kisses me again, softly, passionately, before pulling back and staring at me, blinking lightly. He takes my hand and leads me back to his room, leaving me tottering, so I obediently follow him. Stunned. He wants this.

In his bedroom, he looks at me as we stand by his bed.

'Believe me?' he suddenly asks. I nod, my eyes wide with the sudden realization that I trust him. What is he going to do to me now? An electric shiver runs through me.

'Good girl,' he breathes, his thumb brushing my bottom lip. He walks away into his closet and returns with a silver-Maury woven silk tie.

'Knit your hands together in front of you,' he orders, pulling the napkin away from me and throwing it on the floor.

I do as he asks, and he ties my wrists with his tie, knotting it tightly. Her eyes shine with wild excitement. He pulls on the binding. It is safe. Some Scouts had to learn these knots. My pulse became incredibly angry, my heart pounding a wild tattoo. He runs his fingers over my braids.

'You look so young with it,' he whispers and walks forward. Instinctively, I step back until I feel the bed against the back of my knees. He drops his towel, but I cannot take my eyes off his face. Her expression is fiery, full of desire.

'Oh, Naddalin, what should I do to you?' he whispers as he lowered me onto the bed, lying next to me, and raising his hands above my head.

'Keep your hands here, don't move them, get it?' His eyes burn in mine and I am breathless from their intensity. This is not a man I want to meet... ever.

'Answer me,' he asks, his voice soft.

'I won't move my hands.' I am breathless.

'Good girl,' he whispers and deliberately licks her lips slowly. I am mesmerized by his tongue slowly passing over his upper lip. He looks me in the eye, looks at me, appreciates. He leans in and plants a quick, chaste kiss on my lips.

'I'm going to kiss you all over, Miss Black,' he said softly, and he takes my chin, pushing it up to give it access to my throat. Her lips slide down my throat, kissing, sucking, and nibbling, down to the little dip at the base of my neck. My body jumps to attention... everywhere. My recent bathing experience has made my skin hypersensitive. My hot blood is pooling in my stomach, between my legs, right there. I moan.

I want to touch it. I move my hands and awkwardly since I am restrained, I can feel her hair. He stops kissing me and looks at me, shaking his head from side to side, twisting as he does. He grabs my hands and places them over my head again.

'Don't move your hands, or we have to start all over again,' he scolds me softly.

Oh, he is so teasing.

'I want to touch you.' My voice is all panting and uncontrollable.

'I know,' he whispers. 'Keep your hands above your head,' he orders in a loud voice.

He takes my chin again and starts kissing my throat like before. Oh... he is so frustrating.

His hands roam my body and breasts as he reaches the hollow at the base of my neck with his lips. He swirls the tip of his nose around him then begins a very leisurely cruise with his mouth, heading south, following the path of his hands, down my breastbone to my breasts. Everyone is kissed and bitten gently and my nipples are tenderly sucked.

~*~

Holy shit.

My hips start to sway and move on their own, squealing to the rhythm of her mouth over me, and I desperately try to remember to keep my hands above my head.

'Stay still,' he warns, his warm breath against my skin. Reaching my navel, he plunges his tongue inside, then gently rubs my stomach with his teeth. My body tilts off the bed 'Hmm. You are so nice, Miss Black.' His nose slides along the line between my stomach and my pubic hair, biting me gently, teasing me with his tongue. Straightening up abruptly, he kneels at my feet, grabbing both my ankles and spreading my legs wide.

Holy shit. He grabs my left foot, bends my knee, and brings my foot to his mouth.

Watching and assessing my every reaction, he tenderly kisses each of my toes and then gently bites each one on the pads. When it reaches my little toe, it bites harder and I convulse, moaning. He slides his tongue over my instep - and I cannot look at him anymore.

It is too erotic. I will burn. I close my eyes and try to absorb and I do it by all the sensations it creates. He kisses my ankle and trails kisses from my calf to my knee,

stopping just above. He then begins on my right foot, repeating the entire process, seductive and mind-blowing.

'Oh, please,' I moan as he bites my little toe, the action echoing deep in my stomach.

'All the good things, Miss Black,' he hisses.

This time it does not stop at my knee, it continues inside my thigh, spreading my thighs apart as he does. And I know what he is going to do, and part of me wants to push him away because I am mortified and embarrassed. He is going to kiss me over there! I know that. And part of me prides itself on the anticipation. He turns to my other knee and kisses me along my thigh, kissing, licking, sucking, then he is between my legs, running his nose up and down my cock, incredibly soft, incredibly soft. I am writing to you... oh my.

He stops, waiting for me to calm down. I do and lift my head to look at him, my mouth open as my pounding heart struggles to come out.

'Do you know how intoxicating you feel, Miss Black?' he whispers, and keeping his eyes on mine, he digs his nose into my pubic hair and inhales.

I blush scarlet all over, feeling weak, and instantly close my eyes. I cannot watch him do this!

He blows gently over the entire length of my penis. Oh fuck...

'I like this.' It gently pulls on my pubic hair. 'Maybe we'll keep this.'

'Oh... please,' I am begging you.

'Hmm, I like it when you beg me, Naddalin.'

I moan.

'Tit for tat is not my usual style, Miss Black,' he whispers, blowing me gently up and down. 'But I liked you today, and you should be rewarded.' I hear the wicked smile in her voice, and as my body sings from her words, her tongue slowly begins to circle my clit as her hands hold my thighs together.

'Aargh! I moan as my body tilts and convulses at the touch of his tongue.

He swirls his tongue around, repeatedly, continuing the torture. I lose all sense of myself, every atom of my being is focused hard on this small and powerful powerhouse at the top of my thighs. My legs stiffen, and he slides his finger inside me, and I hear his growl.

'Oh, baby. I love that you are so wet for me.'

He moves his finger in a wide circle, stretching me out, pulling me over, his tongue reflecting his actions, in circles and circles, I moan. It is too much... My body craves relief, and I cannot deny it anymore. I let go, losing all convincing thoughts as my orgasm gripped me, twisting my insides repeatedly. Holy shit. I scream, and the world plunges in and disappears as the force of my orgasm nullifies everything.

I am panting and faintly hear the tearing of the foil. Very slowly, he enters me and begins to move. Oh my. The sensation is painful and soft, bold, and gentle at the same time.

'How is it?' he breathes.

'Good. Good,' I breathe. And it starts to move, fast, strong, and big, sinking into me repeatedly, relentless, pushing and pushing me until I am close to the edge again. I moan.

'Come for me, baby.' His voice is harsh, harsh, raw in my ear, and I explode around him as he quickly hammers inside me.

'Thanks fucking,' he whispers, and he pushes hard again and moans as he climaxes, pressing himself against me. Then he stops moving, his body rigid.

Collapsing on top of me, his full weight push me into the mattress. I run my tied hands over his neck and squeeze it as best I can. I knew then that I would do anything for this man. I am his. The wonder he presented to me is beyond anything I could have imagined. And he wants to go further, so much further, to a place that I cannot even, in my innocence, imagine. Oh... what to do?

He leans on his elbows and looks at me, his eyes deep gray.

'See how good we are together,' he whispers. 'If you give yourself to me, it will be so much better. Trust me, Naddalin, I can take you to places you do not even know exist.'

His words echo my thoughts. He strokes his nose against mine. I am still in shock at my extraordinary physical reaction to him, and I gaze blankly at him, catching a cohesive thought.

Suddenly, we both become aware of the voices in the hallway outside his bedroom door. It takes a while to process what I can hear.

'But if he is still in bed, then he must be sick. He is never in bed yet. Grayson never sleeps.'

'Mrs. Maury, please.'

'Stephen. You cannot keep me from my son.'

'Mrs. Maury, he is not alone.'

'What do you mean he's not alone?'

'He has someone with him.'

'Oh...' Even I can hear the disbelief in his voice.

Grayson blinks quickly, staring at me, eyes wide in horror full of humor.

'Shit! It is my mother.'

He comes out of me suddenly. I wince. He sits on the bed and throws the used condom into a trash can.

'Come on, we have to get dressed - that's if you want to meet my mom.' He smiles, jumps out of bed, and puts on his jeans, no underwear! I find it difficult to sit down because I am still tied up.

'Grayson - I can't move.'

His smile widens, and bending down, he undoes the tie. The woven pattern made an indented pattern around my wrists. It is... sexy. He looks at me. He is amused, his eyes dance with joy. He kisses my forehead quickly and beams at me.

'Another first,' he admits, but I have no idea what he is talking about.

'I don't have clean clothes here.' I am suddenly panicked and considering what I have just been through, I find the panic overwhelming. His mother! Holy shit. I

have no clean clothes and she practically fell on us red-handed. 'Maybe I should stay here.

'Oh, no, no,' Grayson threatens. 'You can wear something to me.' He puts on a white t-shirt and runs his hand through his just kissed hair. Despite my anxiety, I lose my train of thought. Will I ever get used to looking at this handsome man?

Her beauty is derailed.

'Naddalin, you could carry a bag and you would look lovely.' Please do not worry.

I would like you to meet my mother. Dress. I am just gonna go and calm her down. Her mouth presses into a hard line. 'I'll be waiting for you in this room in five minutes or else I'll come and drag you out of here myself in whatever you're wearing.' My t-shirts are in this drawer.

My shirts are in the closet. Help me. He looks at me speculatively for a moment, then leaves the room.

Holy shit. Grayson's mother. It is so much more than what I bargained for. Maybe meeting her will help put together a small part of the puzzle. It might help me understand why Grayson is the way he is... Suddenly I want to meet her. I take my shirt off the floor and am happy to find that it survived the night well with almost no wrinkles. find my blue bra under the bed and get dressed quickly. But if there is one thing I hate, it is not wearing clean panties. I dig into Grayson's dresser and fall on his underpants.

After putting on a pair of tight gray Calvin Kleins, I pull on my jeans and Converse.

Grabbing my jacket, I rush into the bathroom and look at my overly bright eyes, flushed face - and hair! Holy shit... just fucked braids do not suit me either. I look in the cabinet for a brush and find a comb. We will have to do it. A ponytail is the only answer. I despair of my clothes. I should take Grayson on his clothing offer.

My subconscious tightens its lips and covers up the word 'ho'. I do not know. Pounding in my jacket, glad the cuffs were covering the revealing patterns of his tie, I take one last anxious look at myself in the mirror. This will have to do. I make my way into the main living room.

'She's there.' Grayson stands from where he is lounging on the couch.

Her expression is warm and grateful. The sandy-haired woman next to him turns and looks at me, a megawatt smile. She gets up too. She is immaculately dressed in a camel-colored fine knit sweater dress with matching shoes. She looks neat, elegant, beautiful, and inside I am a little dying, knowing that I look so messy.

'Mother, this is Naddalin Black. Naddalin, this is Billie Trevelyan-Maury.

Dr. Trevelyan-Maury holds out his hand to me. T... for Trevelyan?

'What a pleasure to meet you,' she whispers. If I am not mistaken, there is wonder and stunned relief in her voice and a warm glow in her hazel eyes. I grab her hand and cannot help but smile, returning her warmth.

'Dr Trevelyan-Maury,' I whispered.

'Call me Billie,' she smiles, and Grayson frowns. 'I am usually Dr. Trevelyan, and Mrs. Maury is my mother-in-law. She winks. 'So how did you meet?' She looks at Grayson questioningly, unable to hide her curiosity.

'Naddalin interviewed me for the student newspaper at OVHS because I'm graduating there this week.'

Double shit. I had forgotten that.

'So you graduated this week?' Billie asks.

'Yes.'

My cell phone starts ringing. Maury, I bet.

'Sorry.' It is in the kitchen. I walk around and lean over the breakfast counter, not checking the number.

'Maury.

'Dios Mio! Naddalin! Holy shit, it is Sam. He looks desperate. 'Where are you, I tried to contact you. I need to see you, to apologize for my behavior on Friday. Why haven't you returned my calls?'

'Look Sam, now is not a good time.' I glance anxiously at Grayson who is watching me intently, his face impassive as he whispers something to his mother. I turn my back to him.

'Where are you, Maury is so evasive,' he moaned.

'I'm in New York.'

'What are you doing in New York? Are you with him?'

'Sam, I will call you later. I can not talk to you right now. I am hanging up.

I also casually walk over to Grayson and his mother. Billie is in full swing.

'... And Jack called to say that you were there - I have not seen you in two weeks, honey.'

'Has he done it now?' Grayson whispers, looking at me, his expression unreadable.

'I thought we could have lunch together, but I can see you have other plans, and I don't want to interrupt your day.' She picks up her long cream coat and turns to him, offering him her cheek. He kisses her briefly, gently. She does not touch him.

'I have to get Naddalin back to Pittsburgh.'

'Of course, honey. Naddalin, it has been such a pleasure. Hope we meet again.'

She holds out her hand to me, her eyes shining and we shake.

Stephen appears from... where?

'Mrs. Maury?' He asks.

'Thanks, Stephen.' He accompanies her out of the room and through the double doors of the foyer. Stephen was here the whole time, how long has he been here, where has he been?

Grayson looks at me.

'So the photographer called?'

Shit.

'Yes.'

'What did he want?

'Just to apologize, you know - for Friday.'

Grayson narrows his eyes.

'I see,' he said simply.

Stephen reappears.

'Mr. Maury, there is a problem with the cargo from Darfur.'

Grayson nods sharply at her.

'Fake and Gay back to Boeing Field?'

'Yes sir.'

Stephen nods to me.

'Miss Black'.

I smile back at him shyly, and he turns and leaves.

'Does he live here Stephen?'

'Yes.' His tone is cut off. What is his problem?

Grayson walks over to the kitchen and picks up his BlackBerry, going through some emails, I guess. His mouth presses into a hard line, and he makes a call.

'Ros, what's the problem?' he slams. He listens to me, looking at me, gray eyes speculative, as I stand in the middle of the huge room wondering what to do with myself, feeling extraordinarily embarrassed and out of place.

'I am not putting any crew in jeopardy. No, cancel... we will drop the air instead... Good.'

He hangs up. The heat in his eyes is gone. He looks surly, and with a glance at me, he walks over to his office and comes back a moment later.

'That's the contract. Read it, and we will discuss it next weekend. May I suggest you do some research, so you know what it is.' He pauses. 'That's if you agree, and I really hope you do.' He adds, his tone softer, anxious.

'Research?

'You will be amazed at what you can find on the Internet,' he whispers.

The Internet! I do not have access to a computer, only Maury's laptop, and I could not use Eastwood's, surely not for that kind of 'research'?

'What is that?' he asks, tilting his head to one side.

'I do not have a computer. I will see if I can use Maury's laptop.

He hands me a kraft paper envelope.

'I'm sure I can... uh, lend you one.' Grab your things, we will head back to Pittsburgh and have lunch on the way. I need to get dressed.

'I'm just going to make a call,' I whisper. I just wanna hear Maury's voice. He frowns.

'The photograph?' His jaw tightens and his eyes burn. I blink at him. 'I do not like to share, Miss Black. Remember this. His calm, chilling tone is a warning, and with a long, cold look at me, he walks back to the bedroom.

Holy shit.

I just wanted to call Maury, I wanted to call her, but her sudden distance left me paralyzed. What happened to the generous, relaxed, and smiling man who made love to me not half an hour ago?

'Ready?' Grayson asks as we stand by the double doors of the foyer.

I nod uncertainty. He resumed his distant, polite, and tense personality, his mask put back in place and exposed. He is carrying a leather messenger bag. Why does he need this? He stays in Pittsburgh, and then I remember graduating. Oh yes... he will be there on Thursday.

He wears a black leather jacket. He sure does not look like the multi-multi-million-ary billionaire, anything, in those clothes. He looks like a boy on the wrong side

of the runways, an ill-bred rock star or a runway model. I sigh inwardly, wishing I had a tenth of his balance. He is so calm and controlled. I frown, remembering his anger over Sam... well, he seems to be.

Stephen hovers in the background

'Tomorrow then,' he says to Stephen, who nods

'Yes sir. What car do you take, sir?

He looks at me briefly.

'The R8'.

'Have a nice trip, Mr. Maury. Miss Black.' Stephen looks at me kindly, although there may be a hint of pity hidden deep in his eyes.

He no doubt thinks that I have succumbed to Mr. Maury's questionable sexual habits. Not yet, just her exceptional sex habits, or sex is like that for everyone. I frown at the thought. I have no comparison and I cannot ask Maury. This is something I am going to have to discuss with Grayson. It is perfectly natural for me to talk to someone - and I cannot talk to them if they are so open one minute and so unemotional the next.

Stephen opens the door for us and lets us through. Grayson calls the elevator. 'What's the matter, Naddalin?' he asks. How does he know that I am chewing on something in my mind? He reaches out and pulls my chin.

'Stop biting your lip, or I'll fuck you in the elevator, and I don't care who comes in with us.'

I blush, but there is a hint of a smile around her lips, finally, her mood seems to change. 'Grayson, I have a problem.'

'Oh?' I have his full attention.

The elevator arrives. We walk in and Grayson presses the button marked G.

'Well,' I rinse off. How do you say that 'I need to talk to Maury. I have so many questions about sex, and you are too involved. If you want me to do all these things, how do I know -?' I stop, struggling to find the right words. 'I just don't have a warrant.'

He rolls his eyes at me.

'Talk to him if you have to.' He looks exasperated. 'Make sure she doesn't mention anything to Jack.'

I bristle at his insinuation. Maury is not like that.

'She wouldn't do that, and I won't tell you anything that she tells me about Jack - if she said anything to me,' I add quickly.

'Well the difference is, I don't want to know about her sex life,' Grayson whispers dryly. 'Jack is a curious bastard. But only about what we have done so far,' he warns.

'She would probably have my balls if she knew what I wanted to do to you,' he adds so softly that I am not sure I am supposed to hear him.

'Alright,' I gladly accept, smiling at him, relieved. I do not want to dwell on the thought of Maury with Grayson's balls.

His lip comes up to me and he shakes his head.

'The sooner- I get your submission the better, and we can stop this,' he whispers.

'Stop all what?'

'You defying me.' He leans down and takes my chin and plants a quick, soft kiss on my lips as the elevator doors open. He grabs my hand and leads me into the underground garage.

Me defying him... how?

Next to the elevator, I can see the black Audi 4x4, but it is the sleek, sporty black number that flips open and lights up when it brings the keychain to it. It is one of those cars that should have a very leggy blond-haired person, wearing nothing but a belt, sprawled over the hood.

'Nice car,' I whisper dryly.

He looks up and smiles.

'I know,' he said, and for a split second, the young and carefree Grayson is back. It warms my heart. He is so excited. The boys and their toys. I roll my eyes at him but cannot seem to stifle my smile. He opens the door for me and I go upstairs. Whoa... it is low. He circles the car with easy Billie and elegantly folds his long frame beside me. How does he do that?

'So, what kind of car is this?'

'It is an Audi R8 Spyder. It is a beautiful day, we can get off the roof. There is a baseball cap in there. There should be two.' He points to the glove box. 'And sunglasses if you want them.'

He turns on the ignition and the engine roars behind us. He places his bag in the space behind our seats, presses a button and the roof slowly tilts. With the push of a switch, Bruce Springsteen surrounds us.

'I must love Bruce,' he smiles at me and pulls the car out of the parking space, and walks up the steep ramp where we stop for the barrier.

Then we are in the bright May morning in New York. I dig in the glove box and retrieve the baseball caps. Sailors. He likes baseball, I pass him a cap and he puts it on. I put my ponytail behind mine and pulled the visor down.

People are watching us as we drive through the streets. For a moment, it is his... and then a very paranoid part thinks everyone is looking at me because they have known what I have been doing for twelve hours, but eventually I realize it is the car. Grayson seems unconscious, lost in thought.

The traffic is light and we are soon on I-5 heading south, the wind sweeping our heads. Bruce sings about the fire and his desire. What aptitude. I blush as I listen to the words. Grayson looks at me. He has his Ray-Bans, so I do not know what he is thinking. His mouth twists slightly, and he reaches out and places his hand on my knee, squeezing it gently. My breathing is blocked.

'Hunger?' He asks.

Not for the food.

'Not particularly.'

Her mouth tightens in that hard line.

~*~

'You have to eat, Naddalin,' he chides. 'I know a wonderful place near Olympia. We will stop there.' He squeezes my knee again, then puts his hand back on the wheel, putting his foot on the accelerator. I am pressed against the back of my seat. Boy, this car can move.

The restaurant is small and intimate, a wooden chalet in the middle of a forest. The decor is rustic: random chairs and tables with gingham tablecloths, wildflowers in small vases. Cuisine Sauvage boasts above the door.

'I have not been here for a while. We have no choice - they cook whatever they have caught or picked up.' He raises his eyebrows in mock horror, and I must laugh. The server takes our drink order. She blushes when she sees Grayson, avoiding eye contact with him, hiding under her long blonde bangs. She loves him! It is not just me!

'Two glasses of Pinot Grigio,' Grayson said in a commanding voice. I tighten my lips, exasperated.

'What?' He slams.

'I wanted a Coke Light,' I whisper.

His gray eyes narrow and he shakes his head.

'Pinot Grigio is a decent wine, it will go well with the meal, whatever we get.'

He said patiently.

'What do we get?'

'Yes.' He smiles, his dazzling head tilted to one side, and my stomach jumps over my spleen. I cannot help but send her glorious smile back.

'My mother liked you,' he said dryly.

'Really?' His words make me blush with pleasure.

'Oh yes. She always thought I was gay.'

My mouth is open and I remember this question... from the interview. Oh no.

'Why did she think you were gay?' I whisper.

'Because she's never seen me with a girl.'

'Oh... not even one of the fifteen?'

He smiles.

'You remember that. No, none of the fifteen.'

'Oh.'

'You know, Naddalin, it's been a weekend of premieres for me too,' he said softly.

'He has?'

'I have never slept with anyone, never had sex in my bed, never piloted a girl at Fake and Gay, never introduced a woman to my mother. What are you doing to me? His eyes burn, their intensity takes my breath away.'

The server arrives with our glasses of wine, and I immediately take a sip. Does it open or is it just making an informal observation?

'I really enjoyed this weekend,' I whisper. He narrows his eyes at me again.

'Stop biting that lip,' he growls. 'Me too,' he adds.

'What is vanilla sex?' I ask if there is anything to distract me from the intense, hot, and sexy gaze he gives me. He is laughing.

'Amazingly simple sex, Naddalin. No toys, no added extras.' He shrugs his shoulders. 'You know... well actually no, but that's what it means.'

'Oh.' I thought it was melted chocolate brownie sex we had, with a cherry on top. But hey, what do I know?

The server brings us soup. We both look at him dubiously.

'Nettle soup', informs the server before turning around and returning to the kitchen. I do not think she likes being ignored by Grayson. I take a temporary taste. This is delicious.

Grayson and I look at each other in relief. I laugh and he tilts his head to one side.

'It's a beautiful sound,' he whispers.

'Why haven't you had vanilla sex before, have you always done... uh, what have you done?' I ask, intrigued.

He slowly nods his head.

'Kind of.' His voice is suspicious. He frowns for a moment and seems to be engaged in some sort of internal struggle. Then he looks up, a decision is made. 'A friend of my mother's seduced me when I was fifteen.'

'Oh.' Holy shit it is young!

'She had very particular tastes. I was her submissive for six years.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'Oh.' My brain froze, dumbfounded in inactivity by this admission.

'So, I know what that entails, Naddalin. His eyes shine with insight.'

I watch him, unable to articulate anything - even my subconscious is silent.

'I didn't really have an ordinary introduction to sex.'

Curiosity comes into play.

'So you never dated anyone in college?'

'No.' He shakes his head to emphasize this point.

The server takes our plates, interrupting us for a moment.

'Why?' I ask when she left.

He smiles sardonically...

'Do you really want to know?'

'Yes.'

'I did not want to. She was all I wanted, what I needed. And besides, she would have beaten me the shit.' He smiles affectionately at the memory.

Oh, that is too much information - but I want more.

'So, if she was a friend of your mother's, how old was she?'

He smiles.

'Old enough to know better.'

'Do you still see her?'

'Yes.'

'Are you... uh...?' I rinse.

'No.' He shakes his head and smiles indulgently at me. 'She is a very good friend.'

'Oh. Does your mother know that?'

He gives me a not stupid look.

'Of course not.'

The server returns with deer, but my appetite is gone. What a revelation.

Grayson the submissive... Holy shit. I take a big slug of Pinot Grigio - he is right, of course, it is delicious. Damn, all these revelations, there is so much to think about. I need time to process this, when I am alone, not when I am distracted by his presence. He is so overwhelming, so Alpha Male, and now he is thrown that bomb into the equation. He knows what it is.

'But couldn't that have been full time?' I am confused.

'Well, it was, even though I did not see her all the time. It was hard. I was still in school and then in university. Eat, Naddalin.'

'I am not hungry, Grayson. I am in shock at your disclosure.

His expression hardened.

'Eat,' he said softly, too softly.

I am watching him. This man - sexually abused as a teenager - his tone is so threatening.

'Give me a moment,' I whisper. He blinks several times.

'Alright,' he whispers and continues with his meal.

This is what it will be like if I sign it by ordering myself. I frown. Do I want this?

Grabbing my knife and fork, I temporarily cut off the deer. It is delicious.

'Is this what our mistake will look like... relationship?' I whisper. 'You order me?' I cannot bring myself to watch it.

'Yes,' he whispers.

'I see.'

'And besides, you'll want me to do it,' he adds, his voice low.

I doubt it. I slice another piece of deer, holding it against my mouth.

'It's a big step,' I whisper and eat.

'It is.' He briefly closes his eyes. When he opens them, they are wide and serious.

'Naddalin, you must go with your gut. Do your research, read the contract - I am happy to discuss any aspect. I will be in Pittsburgh until Friday if you want to talk about it first. His words come to me hastily. 'Call me - we can have dinner - say, Wednesday, I want it to work. I have never wanted anything as much as I want it to work.'

Her burning sincerity, her desire, is reflected in her eyes. This is what I do not understand. Why me? Why not one of the fifteen? Oh no... Will it be me - a number?

Sixteen among many others?

'What happened to the fifteen?' I let it slip.

He raises his eyebrows in surprise, then seems resigned, shaking his head.

'Various things, but it boils down to,' he stops, struggling to find the words I mean.

'Incompatibility.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'And do you think I could be compatible with you?'

'Yes.'

'So, you don't see any of them anymore?'

'No, Naddalin, I am not. I am monogamous in my relationships.'

Oh... this is news.

'I see.'

'Do the research, Naddalin.'

I put down my knife and fork. I cannot eat anymore.

'Is that it, is that all you're going to eat?'

I agree. He looks at me but chooses not to say anything. I breathe a little sigh of relief.

My stomach is spinning with all this added information, and I feel a little dizzy from the wine. I watch him devour everything on his plate. He eats like a horse. He must work to stay in such great shape. The memory of the way her pajamas hung from her hips spontaneously comes to mind. The image is distracting. I squirm uncomfortably. He looks at me and I blush.

'I would give anything to know what you're thinking right now,' he whispers.

I blush again.

He gives me a nasty smile.

'I can guess,' he teases softly.

'I'm glad you can't read my mind.'

'Your mind, no Naddalin, but your body - which I must have known well since yesterday.' Her voice is suggestive. How does he switch from one mood to another so quickly? He is so mercurial... It is hard to follow.

He waves to the server and asks for the check. Once paid, he gets up and extends his hand.

'Come.' Taking my hand in his, he leads me back to the car. This contact, flesh against flesh, is what is so unexpected, normal, intimate to him. I cannot reconcile this ordinary, tender gesture with what he wants to do in this room... The red chamber of pain.

We are quiet on the road from Olympia to York, both lost in our thoughts.

When he parks in front of my apartment, it is five in the evening. The lights are on - Maury is home. Packaging, no doubt, unless Jack was still around. He cuts the engine and I realize I am going to have to leave him.

'Do you want to come in?' I ask. I do not want him to leave. I want to extend our time together.

'No, I have work to do,' he said simply, looking at me, his expression unfathomable.

I watch my hands as I tie my fingers together. Suddenly, I feel moved.

He is leaving. Reaching out, he takes one of my hands and slowly brings it back to his mouth, tenderly kissing the back of my hand, a gesture so sweet and old-fashioned. My heart leaps in my mouth.

'Thanks for this weekend, Naddalin. It was... the best. On Wednesday, I will pick you up from work, wherever you are from?' he said softly.

'Wednesday,' I whisper.

He kisses my hand again and puts it back on my lap. He comes out, comes to my side, and opens the passenger door. Why do I suddenly feel helpless? A lump forming in my throat? I must not let him see me like this. Fixing a smile on my face, I

climb out of the car and up the path, knowing that I must face Maury, dreading facing Maury. I turn around and look at him halfway. Chin up Black, I scold myself.

'Oh... I am wearing your underwear.' I give him a small smile and pull up the waistband of my underwear so he can see. Grayson's mouth opens, shocked. What a great reaction. My mood immediately changes, and I sashay around the house, part of me wanting to jump and kick in the air. YES! My inner goddess is delighted.

Maury is in the living room packing his books in crates.

'You're back. Where's Grayson How are you?' Her voice is feverish, anxious, and she leaps up to me, grabbing my shoulders, scrutinizing my face before I even say hello.

Damn... I must deal with Maury's persistence and tenacity, and I have a signed legal document saying I cannot speak. It is not a healthy mix.

'Well, how was it? She smiles mischievously.

I cannot help but smile at his worry and burning curiosity, but suddenly I feel shy.

I am blushing. It was very private. All. See and find out what Grayson must hide. But I must give her a few details because she will not leave me alone until I do.

'It was good, Maury. Alright, I think,' I said softly, trying to hide my embarrassed and revealing smile.

'You think?'

'I have nothing to compare, have I?' I shrug my shoulders to apologize.

'Did he make you come?'

Holy shit. She is so direct. I turn scarlet.

'Yes,' I mumble, exasperated.

Maury pulls me onto the couch and we sit down. She shakes my hands.

'That is good.' Maury looks at me incredulously. 'It was your first time. Wow, Grayson must really know what he is doing.'

Oh Murr if you only knew.

'My first time was horrible,' she continues, making a sad, comical face.

'Oh?' It interests me, something she has never disclosed before.

'Yes, Steve Paton. High school, jock with no cock.' She shudders. 'He was tough. I was not ready. We were both drunk. You know - a typical teenage disaster after prom. Ugh - it took me months before I decided to try again. And not with him, the insane wonder. I was too young. You were right to wait.'

'Maury, that sounds horrible.'

Maury looks nostalgic.

'Yes, it took a year to have my first orgasm through penetrating sex, and here you are... the first time?'

I nod shyly. My inner goddess sits in the lotus position and looks serene except for the sly, self-congratulatory smile on her face.

'I'm glad you lost it to someone who knows his ass off his elbow.' She winks at me. 'So when do you see him again?'

'Wednesday. We have dinner.'

'So you still love her?'

'Yes. But I do not know about... the future.'

'Why?'

'He's complicated, Maury. You know - he lives in a quite different world than mine.'

Excellent excuse. Believable too. Much better than - he has a red room of pain, and he wants to make me his sex slave.

'Oh please do not let it be about the money, Naddalin. Jack said it was very unusual for Grayson to date anyone.'

'Is he?' My voice goes up several octaves.

Too obvious, Black! My subconscious gazes at me, wagging its long, skinny finger, then turns into the scales of justice to remind me that it might sue if I reveal too much.

Ha... what is he going to do - take all my money, must remind Google 'penalties for breaching a nondisclosure agreement while I do the rest of my 'research'. It is as if I had been given a school assignment. I will be noted. I blush, remembering my A for this morning's bath experience.

'Naddalin, what is this?'

'I just remember something Grayson said.'

'You look different,' Maury said fondly.'

'I feel different. Sore,' I confess.

'Sore?'

'A little.' I rinse.

'Me too. Men,' she said with mock disgust. 'They are animals.' We both laugh.

'You are hurt?' I exclaim.

'Yes... overuse.'

I laugh.

'Tell me about Jack the superuser,' I ask when I stop laughing. Oh, I feel myself relaxing for the first time since standing in line at the bar... before the phone call that started it all - when I admired Mr. Maury from afar. Good days without complications.

Maury blushed. Oh my... Maury Agnes Smith does all Naddalin Rose Black on me. She gives me a dewy look. I have never seen her react that way to a man before.

My jaw drops to the ground. Where's Maury, what did you do with her?

'Oh, Naddalin,' she gushed. 'He's so... Everything. And when we... oh... good.' She can barely string together a sentence. She is in such pain.

'You are trying to tell me that you like him.'

She nods, smiling like crazy.

'And I see him on Saturday. He is going to help us move.' She shakes hands, jumps off the couch, and spins to the window. Moving. Damn - I forgot all that, even with the packing boxes around us.

'It helps him,' I said with appreciation. I can also know him. He can give me a glimpse of his strange and disturbing brother.

'So what did you do last night?' I ask. She tilted her head towards me and raised her eyebrows in a what-do-you-think-stupid look.

'Pretty much what you did, even though we had dinner first.' She smiles at me. 'Are you okay? You look a little overwhelmed.'

'I feel overwhelmed. Grayson is very intense.'

'Yeah, I could see how he could be. But was he good to you?'

'Yes,' I reassure her. 'I'm really hungry, should I cook?'

She nods and takes two more books to wrap.

'What do you want to do with the fourteen thousand pounds?' She asks.

'I'll give them back to him.'

'Really?'

'It is a completely overdone gift. I cannot accept it, especially now.' I smile at Murray and she nods.

'I understand. A few letters came for you, and Sam called every hour. He looked desperate.'

'I'll call him,' I whisper evasively. If I tell Maury about Sam, she will take him for breakfast. I retrieve the letters from the dining table and open them.

'Hey, I have interviews! Next week in New York for internships!'

'For which publishing house?'

'For both of them!'

'I told you your GPA would open doors, Naddalin.'

Maury, of course, already has an internship set up at the New York Times. Her father knows someone, who knows someone.

'What does Jack think of you leaving?' I ask.

Maury walks into the kitchen, and for the first time tonight, she is inconsolable.

'He understands. Part of me does not want to go, but it is tempting to stay in the sun for a few weeks. Plus, mom hangs in there, thinking this will be our last real family vacation before Paul and I were not taking the lead. in the world of paid work. '

I have never left the continental United States. Maury leaves for Barbados with his parents and his brother Paul for two whole weeks. I will be Mauryless in our new apartment. It will be weird. Paul has traveled the world since graduating last year. I wonder briefly if I will see him before they go on vacation. He is a lovely guy. The phone rings, knocking me out of my reverie.

'It will be Sam.'

I sigh. I know I need to talk to him. I pick up the phone.

'Hi.'

'Naddalin, you are back! Sam shouts her relief at me.'

'Obviously.' Nadal Cash flows from my voice and I look up at the phone.

He is silent for a while.

'Can I see you I am sorry Friday night, I was drunk... and yo... Will Naddalin - .

Please forgive me.'

'Of course I forgive you Sam. Do not do it again. You know I do not feel like that about you.'

He sighs heavily, sadly.

'I know, Naddalin. I just thought if I kissed you, it might change how you feel.'

'Sam, I love you very much, you mean so much to me. You are like the brother I never had.'

This is not going to change. You know. I hate to let it go, but it is the truth.

'So are you with him now?' His tone is full of disdain.

'Sam, I am not with anyone.'

'But you spent the night with him.'

'It's none of your business!'

'Is it the money?'

'Sam! How dare you!' I cry, staggered by his audacity.

'Naddalin,' he moans and apologizes simultaneously. I cannot handle his little jealousy anymore. I know he is hurt, but my plate is overflowing with Grayson Maury.

'We can have some coffee or something tomorrow. I will call you.' I am accommodating.

He is my friend and I love him very much. But now, I do not need that.

'Tomorrow then. Will you call?' The hope in his voice twists my heart.

'Yes... good night, Sam.' I hang up, not waiting for his answer.

'What was it all about?' Maury asks his hands on his hips. I decided that honesty is the policy. She looks more intractable than ever.

'He gave me a pass on Friday.'

'Sam and Grayson Murray Nadalin, your pheromones must work overtime. What was the stupid idiot thinking? She shakes her head in disgust and returns to packing cases.

Forty-five minutes later, we hang up our packaging for the house specialty, my lasagna.

Maury opens a bottle of wine and we sit among the boxes to eat, drink cheap red wine, and watch crappy TV. This is the norm. It is so grounded and welcome after the last forty-eight hours of... madness. I ate my first meal without haste, boredom, and peace at that time. What is it about him and the food? Maury cleans the dishes, and I finish tidying up the living room. We end up with the sofa, the television, and the dining table. What more would we need? We just have the kitchen and our bedrooms to tidy up, and we have the rest of the week. Result!

The phone rings again. It is Jack. Maury winks at me and jumps into her room like she is fourteen. I know she should write her Valedictorian speech, but Jack is more important. What about the menWhat is Merry - what makes them distracting, all-consuming, and irresistible grab another cork of wine.

I flip through the TV channels, but deep down I know I am procrastinating. Burning a bright red hole in the side of my purse is this contract. Do I have the strength and the means to read it tonight?

I put my head in my hands. Sam and Grayson, both want something from me.

Sam is easy to manage. But Grayson... Grayson takes a whole different league of manipulation, of understanding. Part of me wants to run and hide. What will I do? Her burning gray eyes and that intense, burning gaze come to my mind, and my body tightens at the thought. I gasp. He is not even there and I am excited. I cannot remember his sweet jokes this morning at breakfast, his joy in cheering me up with the helicopter ride, playing the piano for him - the sweet soulful music and so sad.

She is such a complicated person. And now I have an idea of why. A young man deprived of his teenage years, sexually abused by an evil figure of Mrs. MLF stifler's mom... no wonder he is old before his time. My heart filled with sadness at the thought of what he had to go through. I am too naive to know exactly what, but

the research should shed some light. But do I want to know? Do I want to explore this world I know nothing about?

It is such a big step

If I had not met him, I would still be kind and blissfully oblivious. My mind drifts to last night, and this morning... and the incredible, sensual sexuality that I experienced. Do I wanna say goodbye to this? No! Scream my subconscious... my inner goddess nods in a quiet, zen chord with her.

Maury returns to the living room, smiling ear to ear. She is in love - my mouth is speechless. She never behaved like that.

'Naddalin, I am going to bed. I am quite tired.

'Me too, Maury.

She hugs me.

'I am glad you are back in one piece. There is something about Grayson,' she adds calmly, apologizing. I give her a reassuring little smile - while thinking... How does she know? This is what will make her a great journalist, her flawless intuition.

Picking up my purse, I walk quietly to my room. I am weary of all our carnal efforts of the last day and of the complete and utter dilemma that I am faced with. I sit on my bed and gently pull the manila envelope out of the bag, turning it over and over in my hands. Do I want to know the extent of Grayson's depravity? It is so intimidating. I take a deep breath and, heart in my throat, open the envelope.

There are several papers inside the envelope. I fish for them, my heart still pounding, and I sit on my bed and start reading.

CONTRACT:

Concluded this day _____ of 2009 ('the start date') BETWEEN Mr. Grayson Maury of 501 Escala, New York, 1947

('The Dominant)

MISS Naddalin Black of 1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7, Haven Heights,
York, WA 98888

('The Submissive)

THE PARTIES AGREE AS FOLLOWS:

- The following are the terms of a binding contract between the Dominant and the Submitter.

BASIC CONDITIONS

- The fundamental objective of this contract is to allow the Submissive to explore her sensuality and her limits in complete safety while respecting and respecting her needs, her limits, and her well-being.

- The Dominant and the Submissive agree and acknowledge that everything that happens under this contract will be consensual, confidential, and subject to the agreed limits and security procedures outlined in this contract.

Additional safety limits and procedures may be agreed upon in writing.

- The Dominant and the Submissive each warrant that they are free from any sexual, serious, infectious, or life-threatening illnesses, including, but not limited to HIV, herpes, and hepatitis. If during the Term (as defined below) or an extended term of this contract, one of the parties should be diagnosed or become aware of such a disease, it undertakes to inform the other immediately and in any event before any form of physical contact between the parties.

- Compliance with the above warranties, agreements, and covenants (as well as any additional safety limits and procedures agreed upon under clause 3 above) are fundamental to this contract. any breach will render it null with immediate effect and each party agrees to be fully responsible to the other for the consequences of any breach.

- Everything in this contract should be read and interpreted considering the fundamental purpose and fundamental conditions set out in clauses 2-5 above.

ROLES:

- The Dominant must take responsibility for the welfare and proper training, guidance, and discipline of the Submissive. It will decide on the nature of such training, advice, and discipline as well as the time and place of its administration,

subject to any agreed conditions, limitations, and security procedures set out in this contract or further agreed upon thereafter. under clause 3 above.

- If at any time the Dominant does not comply with the conditions, limitations, and security procedures agreed in this contract or further agreed under clause 3 above, the Bidder is entitled to terminate this contract immediately. and leave the Dominant's service without notice.

- Subject to this reservation and clauses 2 to 5 above, the Submitter must serve and obey the Dominant in all things. Subject to any agreed conditions, limitations, and safety procedures outlined in this contract or further agreed under clause 3 above, it will provide the Dominant with any pleasure he may need without question or hesitation and will accept without question or hesitation his training, advice, and discipline in any form whatsoever.

START AND DURATION

- The Dominant and the Subject enter this contract on the Start Date with full knowledge of its nature and undertake to comply with its conditions without exception.

- This contract will be in effect for three calendar months from the start date ('the term'.) At the expiration of the term, the parties will discuss whether this contract and the arrangements they have made under this contract are satisfactory and whether the needs of each party have been met. Each of the parties may propose the extension of this contract subject to adjustments to its conditions or to the arrangements it will have taken under it. In the absence of agreement on such an extension, this contract ends and both parties are free to resume their lives separately.

AVAILABILITY:

- The Submissive will make herself available to the Dominant from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon each week during the Term at times to be specified by the Dominant ('the allotted times.) The additional time allocated may be mutually agreed upon on an ad hoc basis.

- The Dominant reserves the right to remove the Bidder from its service at any time and for any reason. The Submissive may request her release at any time, such request being granted at the discretion of the Dominant subject only to the rights of the Submissive under clauses 2-5 and 8 above.

LOCATION:

- The Submissive will make herself available during Allocated Hours and agreed with overtime at locations to be determined by the Dominant. The Dominant will ensure that all travel costs incurred by the Bidder for this purpose are borne by the Dominant.

SERVICES:

- The following service arrangements have been discussed and agreed upon and will be adhered to by both parties during the term. Both parties recognize that certain matters may arise which are not covered by the terms of this contract or the provisions of the service, or that certain matters may be renegotiated. In such circumstances, other clauses may be proposed by amendment. Any other clause or modification must be accepted, documented, and signed by both parties and is subject to the fundamental conditions set out in clauses 2-5 above.

DOMINANT:

- The Dominant must always make the health and safety of the Submissive a priority. The Dominant shall not at any time require, request, authorize or require the Submitter to participate at the hands of the Dominant in the activities detailed in Annex 2 or any act that either party deems dangerous. The Dominant will not take or allow any action to be taken that could cause severe injury or risk to the life of the Submissive. The other sub-clauses of this clause 15 should be read subject to this reservation and the basic matters agreed upon in clauses 2-5 above.

- The Dominant accepts the Submissive as his own, to possess, control, dominate and discipline for the duration. The Dominant may use the Submissive's body at any time during the Allotted Hours or at another agreed time in any manner, it deems appropriate, sexually, or otherwise.

- The Dominant will provide the Submitter with all necessary training and guidance on how to properly serve the Dominant.

- The Dominant must maintain a stable and secure environment in which the Submissive can perform her duties in the service of the Dominant.

- The Dominant may discipline the Submissive as necessary to ensure that the Submissive fully appreciates his role of enslavement to the Dominant and to discourage unacceptable conduct. The Dominant may whip, spank, whip or bodily punish the Submissive as he sees fit, for purposes of discipline, for personal pleasure, or for another reason which he is not obligated to provide.

- In the formation and administration of the discipline, the Dominant will ensure that no permanent marks are made on the body of the Submissive nor any injuries sustained which may require medical attention.
- In the formation and administration of discipline, the Dominant shall ensure that the discipline and the instruments used for discipline are safe, should not be used in such a way as to cause serious harm, and should not in any way exceed the limits defined and detailed in this contract.
- In the event of illness or injury, the Dominant will take care of the Submissive, ensuring her health and safety, encouraging and, if necessary, ordering medical treatment when deemed necessary by the Dominant.
- The Dominant should maintain his health and seek medical attention if necessary to maintain a safe environment.
- The Dominant must not lend his Submissive to another Dominant.
- The Dominant may restrain, handcuff, or bind the Submissive at any time during the Allotted Times or at any additional time agreed upon for any reason and extended periods, with due regard to the health and safety of the Submissive.
- The Dominant will ensure that all equipment used for training and discipline purposes is maintained at all times in a clean, hygienic, and safe condition.

SUBMITTED:

- The Submissive accepts the Dominant as her master, with the understanding that she is now owned by the Dominant, to be treated as the Dominant wishes during the Term in general but specifically during the Allotted Time and another agreed-upon allotted time.
- The Bidder must obey the rules ('the Rules') set out in Annex 1 to this Agreement.
- The Submissive will serve the Dominant as she sees fit and will endeavor to always please the Dominant to the best of her ability.
- The Submissive will take all necessary measures to maintain her good health and will seek or consult a physician whenever necessary, keeping the Dominant informed at all times of any health problem that may arise.
- The Submissive will ensure that she obtains oral contraception and will ensure that she takes it as and when prescribed to avoid pregnancy.
- The Submissive will unquestionably accept any disciplinary action deemed necessary by the Dominant and will always remember her status and role concerning the Dominant.

- The Submissive must not touch or indulge herself sexually without the permission of the Dominant.
- The Submissive will submit to any sexual activity requested by the Dominant and will do so without hesitation or argument.
 - The Submissive will accept whipping, flogging, spanking, caning, paddling, or any other discipline that the Dominant should decide to administer, without hesitation, investigation, or complaint.
 - The Submissive should not look directly into the eyes of the Dominant except when specifically instructed to do so. The Submissive will keep her eyes lowered and maintain a calm and respectful demeanor in the presence of the Dominant.
 - The Submissive will always respectfully conduct herself towards the Dominant and will only address him as Sir, Mr. Maury, or any other title the Dominant may order.
 - The Submissive will not touch the Dominant without his express permission to do so.

ACTIVITIES:

- The Bidder must not participate in activities or sexual acts that either party deems dangerous or in activities detailed in Annex 2.
- The Dominant and the Tenderer have discussed the activities set out in Annex 3 and recorded in Annex 3 their agreement to them.

SAVE:

- The Dominant and the Submitted recognize that the Dominant may make demands on the Submitted which cannot be met without suffering physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other harm at the time the demands are made to the Submitted. In such circumstances related to this, the Bidder may use a security word ('The Safeword (s)'). Two Safewords will be invoked depending on the severity of the requests.
 - The 'Yellow' Safeword will be used to draw the Dominant's attention to the fact that the Submissive is near her endurance limit.
 - The 'Red' Safeword will be used to draw the attention of the Dominant to the fact that the Submissive cannot tolerate any further requests. When this word is said, the Dominant's action will cease completely with immediate effect.

CONCLUSION:

- We, the undersigned, have read and fully understand the provisions of this contract.
- We freely accept the terms of this contract and have acknowledged it by our signatures below



The Dominant: Grayson Maury

Dated



The Submissive: Naddalin Black

Dated

ANNEX 1

RULES:

Obedience:

The Submissive will immediately obey all instructions given by the Dominant without hesitation or reservation and in a speedy manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except for activities which are described within strict limits (Annex 2.) She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night when not with the Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit.

Clothing:

During the term, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant.

The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submissive, which the Submissive will use. The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall wear for the duration of the adornments that the Dominant requires, in the presence of the Dominant and at another time that the Dominant deems appropriate.

Exercise:

The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four times per week in one-hour sessions at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to the Dominant on the progress of the Submissive.

Personal hygiene / Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or always shaved. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon chosen by the Dominant at times decided by the Dominant, and undergo any treatment the Dominant deems appropriate. All costs will be borne by the Dominant.

Personal security: the submissive does not drink excessively, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in unnecessary danger.

Personal qualities:

The Submissive will not enter a sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will always conduct herself respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant.

It will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed outside the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant.

APPENDIX 2

Strict limits

No acts involving fire games.

No acts involving urination or defecation and their products
No acts involving needles, knives, cuts, piercings, or blood
No acts involving gynecological medical instruments

Maybe acts involving children or animals.

No acts that will leave a permanent mark on the skin.

No act involving the control of breathing.

No activity involving direct contact of electric current (alternating or direct), fire, or flame with the body.

APPENDIX 3

Soft limits:

To be discussed and agreed between the two parties:

Which of the following sexual acts are acceptable to the Bidder?

- Solo Masturbation
- Blowjob
- Cunnilingus
- Reports
- Deep throat
- Swallowing
- Vaginal fisting intercourse
- Cum eating
- Pussy eating

- Anal fisting/finger and licking
- Anal play of all types

Is swallowing the semen acceptable to the submissive?

Is the use of sex toys acceptable for the submissive?

- Vibrator
- Dildos
- Butt Plugs
- Other
- Is bondage acceptable for the submissive?
- Hands in front of
- hands behind the back
- Legs
- Knees
- Elbows
- Ankle Wrists
- Spreader bars
- Tied to the furniture
- Eyes blinded
- Penis
- Bondage with rope
- Bondage with tape
- Bondage with leather cuffs
- Suspension
- Bondage with metal handcuffs/restraints

What are the general attitude of the Submissive about receiving pain
where 1 is love intensely and 5 means hate intensely: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

How much pain does the submissive want to receive Where 1 is zero and 5
is severe: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

Which of the types of pain/punishment/discipline is acceptable to the
Submitter?

- Spanking
- Paddle

- Whipping
- Caning
- Bite
- Nipple clamps
- Genital clamps
- Ice cream
- Hot wax
- Other types/methods of pain

Holy Fuck. I cannot even bring myself to consider the food list. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, and read it again.

My head is buzzing. How do I come to terms with all of this and it is to my advantage to explore my sensuality, my limits - safely - oh please! I laugh angrily. Serve and obey in all things. All the things! I shake my head in disbelief. Does not the wedding ceremony Pittsburgh use these words... obey me. Do couples still say that only three months, that is why there have been so many, he does not keep them long or they have enough after three months, every weekend is too much. I will never see Maury or the friends I could make in my new job - if I have one. I should have a weekend a month to myself. Maybe when I am on my period, it feels... handy.

He is my master! To be treated as you wish! Holy shit.

I shudder at the thought of being whipped or spanked. Spanking would not be that bad, humiliating though. And tied up. Well, he tied my hands together. It was... well it was hot, hot, so maybe it will not be that bad. He will not lend me to another Dominant - yes, he will not. It would be unacceptable. Why do I even think about it?

I cannot look him in the eye. Is this weird? The only way for me to have a chance to see what he is thinking. Who I am kidding, I never know what he is thinking, but I like to look him in the eye. He has beautiful eyes - captivating, intelligent, deep, and gloomy, gloomy with dominant secrets. I remember his burning smokey gaze and pressing my thighs together, squirming.

-And-

I cannot touch it. Well, no surprise there. And those silly rules... No, no, I cannot do that. I put my head in my hands. This is no way to have a relationship. I need to sleep. I am broken. All the physical shenanigans I have been involved in over

the past twenty-four hours have been, frankly, exhausting. And mentally... oh man, that is so much to consider. As Sam would say, real shit. In the morning, it might not read like a bad joke.

I jostle and change quickly. I should borrow Maury's pink flannel pajamas. I want something cuddly and reassuring around me. I head for the bathroom with my t-shirt and nightgowns on and brush my teeth.

I look at myself in the bathroom mirror. You cannot seriously consider this...

My subconscious seems sane and rational, not his usual sneaky self. My inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old. Please let us do this... otherwise we will end up alone with lots of cats and your classic novels to keep you company in Pittsburgh.

The only man I have ever been drawn to, and he comes with a bloody contract, a whip, and an entire world of problems. At least I made it this weekend. My inner goddess stops jumping and smiles serenely. Oh yes... she said, giving me a smug nod.

I blush at the memory of her hands and her mouth on me, her body in mine. As I close my eyes, I feel the delicious familiar pull of my muscles from deep to deep. I want to do this repeatedly. Maybe if I just signed up for sex... it would go with that I guess not.

Am I submissive? I will meet this way. I misled him during the interview. I am shy, yes... but submissive, I let Maury pester me - is that the same? And those soft limits, jeez. My mind is breathtaking, but I am reassured that they are ready to discuss it.

I go back to my room. It is too much to think about. I need a clear head - a fresh morning approach to the problem. I put the incriminated documents back in my bag.

Tomorrow... tomorrow is another day. Climbing into my bed, I turn off the light and lie down looking at the ceiling. Oh, I wish I had never met him. My inner goddess shakes her head at me. She and I know that is a lie. I have never felt so alive as now.

I close my eyes and go out in a heavy sleep with occasional dreams of canopy beds and chains and intense gray eyes. Maury wakes me up the next day.

'Naddalin, I called you. You must have been cold outside.'

My eyes open reluctantly. She is not just up - she has been for a run. I glance at my alarm. It is eight in the morning. Saint Moses, I slept a good nine hours.

'What is that?' I mumble asleep.

'There's a man here with a delivery for you. You must sign for it.'

'What?'

'Come on. It is big. It sounds interesting.' She enthusiastically hops from foot to foot and bounces around the living room. I climb out of bed and grab my dressing gown from the back of my door. A smart young man with a Pittsburgh tail is standing in our living room hugging a large box.

'Hi,' I mumble.

'I'll make you some tea.' Maury rushes to the kitchen.

'Miss Black?'

-And-

I immediately know who the package came from.

'Yes,' I replied cautiously.

'I have a package for you here, but I have to configure it and show you how to use it.'

'Really at this time?'

'Only follow orders, ma'am.' He smiles in a charming but professional way that he does not take a shit.

Did he just call me madam? Did I age ten years overnight? If I have it, it is this contract. My mouth creases in disgust.

'Okay, what is it?'

'It's a MacBook Pro.'

'Of course it is.' I roll my eyes.

'These are not yet available in stores, ma'am, the latest from Apple.'

How it does not surprise me, I sigh heavily.

'Just put it on the dining table over there.'

I wander around the kitchen to join Maury.

'What is that?' She said curious, with bright eyes and a bushy tail. She slept well too.

'It's a Grayson laptop.'

'Why did he send you a laptop?' Do you know you can use mine? ' She said, frowning.

Not for what he has in mind.

'Oh, it is only on loan. He wanted me to try it.' My excuse seems weak. But Maury nods. Oh my... I cheated on Mary Smith. A first. She hands me my tea.

The Mac laptop is sleek and silvery and quite good-looking. It has an exceptionally large screen.

Grayson Maury loves the scale - I think of his living space, in fact, his entire apartment.

'It has the latest operating system and a full suite of programs, plus a one-point-five terabyte hard drive so you have plenty of room, thirty-two GB of RAM - what are you going to use it for?

'...E-mail.'

'Email' he chokes, amazed, raising his eyebrows with a slightly sick look on his face. 'And Internet research? I shrug my shoulders contrite, he sighs.

Well, this has full wireless N's, and I configured it with your Me account details. This baby is ready to go, Pittsburgh was on the planet. 'He looks at him longingly.

'My account?'

'Your new email address.'

I have an e-mail address?

It points to an icon on the screen and keeps talking to me, but it is like white noise.

I have no idea what he is saying, and in all fairness, I am not interested. Just tell me how to turn it on and off - I will find out the rest. I have been using Maury for four years. Maury hisses, impressed when she sees him.

'It's next generation technology.' She raises my eyebrows. 'Most women get flowers or maybe jewelry,' she said suggestively, trying to suppress a smile.

I scowl but cannot keep my face straight. We both burst out laughing and the computer man gapes us, puzzled. He finishes and asks me to sign the delivery slip.

As Maury shows him, I sit down with my cup of tea, open the email program, and sit there waiting for me. There is an email from Grayson. My heart jumps in my mouth. I have an email from Grayson Maury. Nervously, I opened it.

~*~

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer

Date: May 22, 2009 11:15 PM

At: Nadalina Black

Dear, Miss Black, I hope you slept well. Hope you will use this laptop wisely as shown.

Cannot wait for dinner on Wednesday.

Happy to answer all your questions before then, by email, if you wish.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I pressed the answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Your new computer (on loan)

Date: May 23, 2009 8:20 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

I slept very well, thank you - for some strange reason - sir.

I understood that this computer was on loan, not mine.

Naddalin There is instantly a response.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer (on loan)

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:22 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

The computer is loaned. On and on, Miss Black.

I can see from your tone that you have read the documentation that I gave you.

Do you have any questions so far?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I cannot help but smile.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Inquiring Minds

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:25 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

I have a lot of questions, but not suitable for email, and some of us must work for a living.

I do not want or need a computer indefinitely.

Until later, have a good day. Sir.

Naddalin

His response is instantaneous again, and that makes me smile.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your new computer (loaned again)

Date: May 23, 2009, 8:26 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

see yes, baby.

PS: I also work for a living.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I turned off the computer, smiling like a fool. How can I resist playful Grayson? I will be late for work. Well, this is my last week - Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood are going to give me a little break. I ran into the shower, unable to shake my bright smile. He sent me an e-mail. I am like a dizzy little child. And all the contractual angst fades away. As I wash my hair, I try to think about what I could ask of her by email. It is surely better to talk about these things. Suppose someone hacked their account, I blush at the thought. I dress quickly, hastily shout goodbye to Maury, and head off to work my last week at Eastwood. Sam calls at eleven o'clock. 'Hey, are we making some coffee?' He looks like old Sam. Sam my friend, not a - what did Grayson call him Suitor? Ugh. 'Sure. I am at work. Can you come over here to say twelve?' 'See you later.' He hangs up and I go back to restocking the brushes and thinking about Grayson Maury and his contract. Sam is on time. He leaps into the shop like a frolicking puppy with dark eyes. 'Naddalin,' he smiles his dazzling toothy all-Hispanic American smile, and I cannot be mad at him anymore. 'Hi Sam.' I hug him. 'I am starving. I will just tell Mrs.

Eastwood I am going to lunch.' As we head to the local cafe, I slip my arm into Sam's. I am so grateful for his normalcy. Someone I know and understand.

'Hi Naddalin,' he whispers. 'Did you really forgive me?' 'Sam, you know I can never stay mad at you for long.' He smiles. I cannot wait to get home. The allure of emailing Grayson, and I can start my research project. Maury's out there, so I fire up the new laptop and open my email. Sure enough, there is an email from Grayson in the inbox. I practically jumped out of my seat with joy. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Working for a living Date: May 23, 2009, 5:24 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black, I hope you had a good day at work. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I pressed the answer. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Work for a Living Date: May 23, 2009, 5:48 PM To Grayson Maury Sir... I had a wonderful day at work. Thank you. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Get the job done! Date: May 23, 2009, 5:50 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Glad you had a wonderful day. While you are sending an email, you are not doing any research. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Nuisance Date: May 23, 2009, 5:53 PM To Grayson Maury M. Maury, stop emailing me, and I can begin my assignment. I would like another A. Naddalin, I hug myself. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Impatient Date: May 23, 2009, 5:55 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Stop emailing me - and do your mission. I would like to award another A. The first one was so well deserved. ;)

Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Grayson Maury just sent me a blinking smiley... Oh my God. I run Google. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Internet Search Date: May 23, 2009, 5:59 PM To Grayson Maury M. Maury What would you suggest I put in a search engine? Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Internet Search Date: May 23, 2009, 6:02 PM To Naddalin Black Miss Black Always start with Wikipedia. No more emails unless you have questions. Heard?

Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Bossy! Date: May 23, 2009, 6:04 PM To Grayson Murray Yes... sir. You are so bossy. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: In Control Date: May 23, 2009, 6:06 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin, you have no idea. Well, a little idea now. To do work. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I type Submitted in Wikipedia. Half an hour later, I feel slightly uncomfortable and downright shocked deep inside. Do I want this stuff in my head? Jeez - is he doing in the red pain room? I am sitting staring at the screen, and a part of me, a very wet and integral part of me - that I only got to know very recently, is seriously on. Oh my God, some of these things are HOT. But is it for me, damn it... could I do this, I need some space. I need to think.

For the first time in my life, I voluntarily went for a run. I find my ugly, never-used sneakers, sweatpants, and a t-shirt. I put my hair in pigtails, blushing at the memories they bring back to me and plug in my iPod. I cannot sit in front of this technological wonder and watch or read more disturbing material. I need to spend some of this excess, irritating energy. Frankly, I want to run to the Heathman hotel and just demand some control freak's sex. But that is five miles, and I do not think I will be able to run a mile, let alone five, and of course, he could deny me what would be beyond humiliation.

Maury gets out of his car as I walk out the door. She almost drops her groceries when she sees me. Naddalin Black in sneakers. I salute and do not stop for the inquisition. I need to spend some time alone. Snow Patrol screaming in my ears, I set off into the opal and aquamarine twilight.

I walk in the park. What will I do? I want it, but on its terms, I just do not know. I should negotiate what I want. Go through this ridiculous contract line by line and say what is okay and what is not. My research has told me that legally this is unenforceable. He must know that. That just sets the parameters of the relationship. It illustrates what I can expect from him and what he expects from me - my total submission. Am I ready to give this to him, am I even capable?

I am plagued with a question - why is it like this? Is it because he was seduced at such an early age, I just do not know. It is still such a mystery.

I stop next to a large spruce top and put my hands on my knees, breathing hard, drawing precious air into my lungs. Oh, that feels good, cathartic. I can feel my resolve hardening.

Yes. I need to tell him what is right and what is wrong. I must email him my thoughts, and then we can discuss them on Wednesday. I take a deep breath to clean myself up, then walk back to the apartment.

Maury, like herself, bought clothes for her vacation in Barbados.

Mostly matching bikinis and Dandenongs. She will look fabulous in all of them, but she always makes me sit and comment while she tries each of them. There are only so many ways it can be said - you look fabulous Maury. She has a slim and curvy figure to die for. She does not do it on purpose, I know, but I carry my old t-shirt, sweatpants, and sneakers to my room under the pretext of packing more boxes. Could

I be feeling more dissatisfied? Taking the awesome free technology with me, I installed the laptop on my desk. I am sending Grayson an email.

~*~

From: Naddalin Black
Subject: Shocked by the OVHS
Date: May 23, 2009, 8:33 p.m.
To: Grayson Maury

Okay, I have seen enough.

It was good to know you.

Naddalin

I hit send, hugging, laughing at my little joke. Will he find it funny oh shit - probably not. Grayson Maury is not known for his sense of humor. But I know it exists, I have lived it. I went too far. I am waiting for his answer.

I wait... and I wait. I watch my alarm clock. Ten minutes have passed.

To distract me from the anxiety that flourishes in my stomach, I start doing what I told Maury I would do: prepare my room. I start by cramming my books into a crate.

At nine o'clock, I heard nothing. He got out. I sulk irritably as I plug in my iPod headphones, listen to Snow Patrol, and sit down at my small desk to reread the contract and comment.

I do not know why I look up, I catch a slight nudge out of the corner of my eye, I do not know, but when I do he is standing at my bedroom door staring at me carefully. He wears his Maury flannel pants and a white linen shirt, gently twirling his car keys. I take off my headphones and freeze. Shit!

'Good evening, Naddalin. His voice is cold, his expression completely guarded and unreadable. The ability to speak deserts me. Damn Maury for letting him in here without warning. Vaguely, I am aware that I am still in my sweat, showerless,

disgusting, and he is just gloriously delicious, his pants hanging off his hips, and besides, he is here in my room.

'Your email warranted an in-person response,' he explains dryly.

I open my mouth and then close it twice. The joke is on me. Never in this universe or any other universe did I expect him to give up everything and show up here.

'May I sit?' he asks, his eyes dancing humorously now - thank goodness - he will see the funny side?

I agree. The power of speech remains elusive. Grayson Maury is sitting on my bed.

'I was wondering what your room would look like,' he said.

I glance around, plotting an escape route, no - there is only the door or the window yet.

My room is functional but comfortable - sparse white wicker furniture and a tin double bed with a patchwork quilt, made by my mother when she was in her folk American quilting phase. Everything is pale blue and cream.

'It's very serene and peaceful here,' he whispers. Not now... not with you here. Finally, my elongated marrow recalls its purpose, I breathe.

'How? 'Or' What... ?'

He smiles at me.

'I'm still at the Heathman.'

I know that.

'Would you like a drink?' Politeness trumps anything I would like to say.

'No, thank you, Naddalin.' He smirked a searing, twisted smile, his head tilted slightly to the side.

Well, I need it.

'So, was it nice to know me?'

Holy cow, is he offended, I look at my fingers. How am I going to get out of this? If I tell him it was a joke I do not think he will be impressed.

'I thought you would respond by email.' My voice is small, pathetic.

'Are you deliberately biting your lower lip?' he asks darkly.

I blink at him, gasping, releasing my lip.

'I didn't know I was biting my lip,' I whisper.

My heart beats wildly. I can feel this pull, this delicious electricity between us charging, filling the space between us with static electricity. He sits so close to me, his dark smoky gray eyes, his elbows resting on his knees, his legs spread. Leaning forward, he slowly undoes one of my braids, his fingers freeing my hair. My breathing is shallow and I cannot move. I watch him mesmerized as his hand moves to my second pigtail, and pulling on the hair tie, he loosens the braid with his long, skillful fingers.

'So you decided to exercise,' he breathes, his voice soft and melodious. His fingers gently tucked my hair behind my ear. 'Why, Naddalin? His fingers go around my ear, and very gently, he pulls on my earlobe, in rhythm. It is so sexual.'

'I needed some time to think,' I whisper. I am all rabbit/headlights, moth/flame, bird/snake... and he knows exactly what he is doing to me.

'Thinking of what, Naddalin?'

'You.'

'And you decided it was nice to know me, do you mean to know me in a biblical sense?'

Oh shit. I rinse.

'I didn't think you knew the Bible.'

'I went to Sunday school, Naddalin. It taught me a lot.'

'I do not remember reading about nipple clamps in the Bible. You learned from a modern translation.'

Her lips arch with a hint of a smile, and my eyes are drawn to her beautiful sculpted mouth.

'Well, I thought I should come and remind you how nice it was to know me.'

Holy shit. I watch him open-mouthed, and his fingers move from my ear to my chin.

'How about that, Miss Black?'

Her gray eyes shine on me, her inherent defiance in her gaze. His lips are parted - he waits, curled up to strike. Desire - sharp, watery, and hot, burns deep in my stomach.

I take preventative measures and get started on him. Somehow he is moving, I have no idea how, and in the blink of an eye I am on the bed pinned under him, my arms outstretched and held over my head, her free hand gripping my face, and her mouth finds mine.

His tongue is in my mouth, claiming and owning me, and I revel in the strength he uses. I feel it against the length of my body. He wants me, and that does strange and delicious things inside of me. Not Maury in her little bikinis, not one of the fifteen, not the mean Mrs. MLF Stiffler's mom. Me. This handsome man wants me. My inner goddess shines so brightly that she could light up Pittsburgh. He stops kissing me and opening his eyes, I find him looking at me.

'Believe me?' he breathes.

I nod, my eyes wide, my heart bouncing on my ribs, my blood thundering around my body, he leans over, and from his pants pocket, he pulls out his silver Maury silk tie... that tie is woven silver Maury which leaves small impressions of its weaving on my skin. He moves so fast, sitting astride me as he ties my wrists together, but this time he ties the other end of the tie to one of the spokes of my tin headboard. He pulls on my binding to make sure it is secure. I am not going to Pittsburgh where. I am tied to my bed and so excited.

He slides over me and stands beside the bed, looking at me, eyes dark with desire. His gaze is triumphant, mixed with relief.

'It's better,' he whispers and smiles a mean, knowing smile. He leans over and begins to undo one of my sneakers. Oh no... no... my feet. No, I just ran.

'No,' I protest, trying to dismiss him.

He stops.

'If you have any trouble, I'll tie your feet too.' If you make noise, Naddalin, I will gag you.

Shut up. Maury is out listening right now.

Gag me! Maury! I am silent.

He removes my shoes and socks efficiently and slowly takes off my sweatpants.

Oh - what panties am I wearing? He lifts me and removes the quilt and my quilt from under me and back down, this time onto the sheets.

'Now.' He slowly licks his lower lip. 'You bite that lip, Naddalin. You know the effect it has on me. He places his long index finger over my mouth, a warning.

Oh my. I can barely contain myself, lying helpless, watching him move Billie fully in my room, it is an intoxicating aphrodisiac. Slowly, quietly, he takes off his shoes and socks, undoes his pants, and lifts his shirt above his head.

'I think you've seen too much,' he chuckled. He sits astride me again, pulls up my t-shirt and he is going to take it off, but he rolls it up to my neck and then pulls it up over my head so he can see my mouth and my nose, but it covers my eyes. And because it is folded up - I cannot see anything through it.

'Mmm,' he breathes in appreciation. 'It is getting better and better. I will have a drink.'

Leaning down, he kisses me, his lips soft against mine, and his weight shifts off the bed. I hear the silent creak of the bedroom door. Have a drink.
WhereHerePittsburgh?

New York, I try to hear it. I can make out some low growls, and I know he is talking to Maury - oh no... he is naked. What is she gonna say? I hear a slight popping sound. What is that? He returns, the door creaking again, his feet on the bedroom

floor, and the ice clinking against the glass as it swirls in the liquid. What kind of drink? He closes the door and crawls to remove his pants. They fall to the ground and I know he is naked. He sits on top of me again.

'Are you thirsty, Naddalin?' He asks, his voice teasing

'Yes,' I breathe because my mouth is suddenly dry. I hear the ice clinking against the glass, and he sets it down again and leans in and kisses me, pouring a delicious crispy liquid into my mouth as he does. It is white wine. It is so unexpected, hot, albeit icy, and Grayson's lips are cool.

'After?' He whispers.

I agree. It tastes more divine since it has been in her mouth. He leans in and I take another sip of his lips... oh my.

'Let's not go too far, we know your drinking capacity is limited, Naddalin.'

I cannot help it. I smile and he leans in to offer another delicious bite. He is moving around so he is lying next to me, his erection on my hip. Oh, I want it inside of me.

'Is that cool?' he asks, but I hear the edge in his voice.

I tense up. He shakes the glass and leans in, kisses me, and deposits a little shard of ice cream in my mouth with a little wine. He slowly and quietly trails icy kisses down the center of my body, from the base of my throat, between my breasts, down my chest and stomach. It makes a shard of ice appear in my navel in a pool of cool, cold wine.

It burns to the bottom of my stomach. Wow.

'Now you have to be quiet,' he whispers. 'If you move, Naddalin, you'll have wine all over the bed.'

My hips flex automatically.

'Oh no. If you spill the wine, I will punish you, Miss Black.'

I moan and desperately fight the urge to tilt my hips, pulling on my restraint. Oh no...

You're welcome.

With one finger, he lowers my bra cups in turn, my breasts raised, exposed, and vulnerable. Leaning down, he kisses and takes turns pulling each of my nipples with cool, cool lips. I fight my body as it tries to arch its back in response.

'Is that nice?' he breathes while blowing on one of my nipples.

I hear another tinkle of ice, then I can feel it around my right nipple as he pulls on the left one with his lips. I moan, struggling not to move. It is sweet and agonizing torture.

'If you spill the wine, I won't let you come.'

'Oh... please... Grayson... Sir... please.' He drives me crazy. I hear him smile.

The ice in my navel is melting. I am beyond heat - warm, cold, and wanting.

Want it inside of me. Now.

His cold fingers drag languidly over my stomach. My skin is hypersensitive, my hips flex automatically, and the now warmer fluid from my navel seeps into my stomach. Grayson moves quickly, licks it with his tongue, kisses me, bites me softly, sucks.

'Oh my God, Naddalin, you moved out. What am I going to do to you?'

I was panting loudly. All I can focus on is his voice and his touch. Nothing else is real. Nothing else matters, nothing else fits on my radar. Her fingers slip into my panties and I am rewarded with her strong unattended air intake.

'Oh, baby,' he whispers and pushes two fingers inside of me.

I gasp.

'Ready for me so soon,' he said. He temptingly moves his fingers slowly, in, out, and I push against him, tilting my hips up.

'You're a greedy girl,' he growls softly, and his thumb goes around my clit then presses down.

I moan loudly as my body slips under his expert fingers. He reaches out and pushes the shirt over my head so I can see it as I blink in the soft light from my nightlight. I cannot wait to touch it.

'I want to touch you,' I breathe.

'I know,' he whispers. He leans in and kisses me, his fingers still moving rhythmically inside me, his thumb spinning and pressing. His other hand pulls my hair away from my head and holds my head in place. Her tongue mirrors the actions of her fingers, calling out for me. My legs start to stiffen as I push against his hand. He softens his hand, so I am brought back from the brink. He does it repeatedly. It is so frustrating... Oh please Grayson I am screaming in my head.

'It is your punishment, so close and yet so far. Is it right?' he breathes in my ear.

I moan, exhausted, pulling against my restraint. I am helpless, lost in an erotic torment.

'Please,' I beg you, and he finally feels sorry for me.

'How am I going to fuck you, Naddalin?'

Oh... my body is starting to shake. He stops again.

'Please.'

'What do you want, Naddalin?'

'You... now,' I cry.

'Should I fuck you this way, or this way, or this way? There is endless choice,' he breathes against my lips. He withdraws his hand and walks over to the nightstand for a sachet of foil. He kneels between my legs, and very gently removes my panties, staring at me, eyes shining. He puts on the condom. I watch fascinated, hypnotized.

'Is that nice?' he said, stroking himself.

'I meant that as a joke,' I moaned. Please fuck me, Grayson.

He raises his eyebrows as his hand moves up and down its impressive length.

'A joke?' Her voice is menacingly sweet.

'Yes. Please, Grayson,' I beg him.

'Are you laughing now?

'No,' I meow.

I am just a tight ball of sexual urge. He looks at me for a moment, measuring my need, then suddenly grabs me and turns me around. It takes me by surprise, and because my hands are tied, I must support myself on my elbows. He pushes both of my knees on the bed so that my butt is up in the air, and he slaps me hard. Before I can react, he dives into me. I scream - from the slap and his sudden assault, and I instantly come back repeatedly, falling apart under him as he continues to hit me deliciously. He does not stop. I am exhausted. I cannot stand this... and it beats over and repeatedly... then I build again... surely not... no...

'Come on, Naddalin, one more time,' he growls through clenched teeth, and incredibly, my body reacts, convulsing around him as I come again, screaming his name. I shatter into tiny fragments again, and Grayson freezes, finally letting go, silently finding his release.

He collapses on top of me, breathing hard.

'How sweet was that?' he asks through clenched teeth.

Oh my.

I lie down panting and step onto the bed, my eyes closed as he gently pulls away from me. He gets up immediately and gets dressed. When he is fully dressed, he climbs back onto the bed, gently undoes his tie, and removes my t-shirt. I flex my fingers and rub my wrists, smiling at the woven pattern imprinted on my wrists by the tie. I readjust my bra as he pulls the duvet and quilt over me. I look at him completely stunned, and he gives me a smirk.

'It was really cool,' I whisper, smiling shyly.

'There is still that word.'

'Don't you like that word?'

'No. It does not do it for me at all.'

'Oh - I don't know... it seems to have a very beneficial effect on you.'

'I am beneficial, now I am. Could you hurt my ego more, Miss Black?

'I don't think there is anything wrong with your ego.' But even as I say it, I do not feel the conviction of my words - something elusive crosses my mind, a fleeting thought, but it is lost before I can grasp it.

'You think?' Her voice is soft. He is lying next to me, fully dressed, his head resting on his elbow, and I am only wearing my bra.

'Why don't you like to be touched?'

'I do not do it.' He reaches out and plants a soft kiss on my forehead. 'So this email was your idea of a joke.'

I smile apologetically and shrug my shoulders.

'I see. So, are you still considering my proposal?'

'Your indecent proposal... yes I am. I have problems though.'

He smiles at me as relieved.

'I would be disappointed if you didn't.'

'I was going to email them to you, but you kind of interrupted me.'

'Coitus Interruptus'.

'See, I knew you had a sense of humor in there somewhere.' I smile.

'Only certain things are funny, Naddalin. I thought you were saying no, no discussion at all. His voice drops.

'I do not know yet. I have not decided yet. Will you stick to me?'

He raises his eyebrows.

'You did your research. I do not know, Naddalin. I never caught anyone.'

Oh... should I be surprised by this, I know so little about the stage... I do not know.

'Did you have a necklace?' I whisper.

'Yes.'

'By Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

'Mrs. MLF Stiffler's mom! he laughs loudly, freely, and he looks so young and carefree, his head thrown back, his laugh infectious.'

I smile back at him.

'I'll tell her you said that, she'll love it.'

'Do you still talk to her regularly?' I cannot help the shock of my voice.

'Yes.' He is serious now.

Oh... and part of me is suddenly incredibly jealous - I am disturbed by the depth of my feelings.

'I see.' My voice is tight. 'So you have someone you can discuss your alternative lifestyle with, but I'm not allowed.'

He frowns.

'I do not think I ever thought about it like that. Ms. MLF stifflers mom was part of that lifestyle. I told you, she is a good friend now. If you want, I can introduce you to one of them. my old subs, you could talk to him. '

What is he deliberately trying to bother me?

'Is this your idea of a joke?

'No, Naddalin.' He is puzzled, seriously shaking his head.

'No - I'll do it myself, thank you very much,' I slap him, pulling the comforter up to my chin.

He stares at me, at sea, surprised.

'Naddalin, I...' He lost for words. A first, I think. 'I didn't mean to offend you.'

'I am not offended. I am appalled.'

'Dismayed?'

'I don't want to talk to any of your ex-girlfriends... slave... sub... what you call them.'

'Naddalin Black - are you jealous?'

I blush, crimson.

'You stay?'

'I have breakfast tomorrow at the Heathman. Besides, I told you, I do not sleep with girlfriends, slaves, subs, or anyone. Friday and Saturday nights were exceptions.'

This will not happen again. 'I can hear the resolve behind his soft, husky voice.'

I tighten my lips to him.

'Well, I'm tired now.'

'Are you putting me out?' He raised his eyebrows at me, amused and a little dismayed.

'Yes.'

'Well, that's another first.' He looks at me speculatively. 'So nothing you want to discuss now on the contract.'

'No.' I respond with excitement. 'My

God, I would love to give you a good hiding place. You would feel a lot better, and so would I.'

'You cannot say things like that... I have not signed anything yet.'

'A man can dream, Naddalin.' He leans over me and grabs my chin.
'Wednesday?'

He whispers and kisses me lightly on my lips.

'Wednesday,' I agree. 'I will see you outside. If you give me a minute.' I sit and grab my shirt, pushing him out of the way. Amused and reluctant, he gets up from the bed.

'Please pass me on my sweatpants.'

He collects them from the ground and hands them to me.

'Yes, Madam. He tries in vain to hide his smile.

3

I squint at him as I slip my pants on. My hair is a mess, and I know I am going to have to deal with Mary Smith's Inquisition after he leaves. Grabbing a hair tie, I walk to my bedroom door, opening it slightly to see Maury. She is not in the living room. I think I can hear him on the phone in his room. Grayson follows me outside. During the short walk from the bedroom to the front door, my thoughts and feelings come and go, transform. I am no longer angry with him, I suddenly feel unbearable shyness. I do not want him to go. the first time around, I wish he wanted - normal - a normal relationship that did not require a ten-page agreement, a whip, and carabiners in the ceiling of his rec room

I open the door for him and look at my hands. This is my first time having sex at home, and as far as sex goes, it was great. But now I feel like a receptacle - an empty container to fill at will. My subconscious shakes its head.

You wanted to run to the Heathman for sex - you had it delivered express. She crosses her arms and pats her foot with a complaining look on her face. Grayson stops at the door and squeezes my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. His forehead creases slightly.

'It's okay?' he asks tenderly as his thumb lightly strokes my lower lip.

'Yes.' I answer, but in all honesty, I am not sure. I feel a change in basic assumptions. I know if I do this thing with him, I will be hurt. He is no longer able,

interested, or ready to offer me more... and I want more. Much more. The wave of jealousy I felt just moments ago tells me that I have deeper feelings for him than I admitted.

'Wednesday,' he confirms, and he leans forward and kisses me softly. Something changes as he kisses me, his lips become more pressing against mine, his hand moves up my chin and he holds the side of my head, his other hand on the other side. His breathing quickens. He deepened the kiss, leaning against me. I put my hands on his arms.

I want to run them through his hair, but I resist, knowing he will not like it. He rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed, his voice strained.

'Naddalin,' he whispers. 'What are you doing to me?'

'I could tell you the same thing,' I whisper back.

Taking a deep breath, he kisses my forehead and walks away. He deliberately walks down the path to his car as he runs his hand through his hair. Looking up as he opened his car door, he smiled his breathtaking smile. My smile in response is faint, completely dazzled by him, and I remember once again Icarus hovering too close to the Sun. I close the front door as he gets into his sports car. I have an irresistible urge to cry, a sad and lonely melancholy grips me and tightens around my heart. Coming back to my bedroom, I close the door and lean against her, trying to rationalize my feelings. I can not. Slipping on the floor, I put my head in my hands as my tears started to fall.

Maury knocks softly.

'Naddalin?' she whispers. I open the door. She looks at me and throws her arms around me.

'What's wrong? What did that scary bastard do?'

'Oh Murr, nothing I did not want him to do.'

She pulls me to my bed and we sit down.

'You have terrible sex hair.'

Despite my poignant sadness, I laughed.

'It was good sex, not great at all.'

Maury smiles.

'It is better. Why are you crying, you never cry.' She retrieves my brush from the side table and, sitting behind me, very slowly begins to brush the knots.

'I just don't think our relationship is going to go to Pittsburgh where.' I look at my fingers.

'I thought you said you were going to see him on Wednesday?'

'I am, that was our original plan.'

'So why did he come here today?'

'I sent him an email.'

'Ask him to drop by?'

'No, saying I didn't want to see him anymore.'

'And he introduces himself to Naddalin, that's genius.'

'It was actually a joke.'

'Oh. Now I am really confused.'

Patiently, I explain the essence of my email without revealing anything

'So you thought he would respond by email.'

'Yes.'

'But instead, he comes here'

'Yes.'

'I would say he's completely in love with you.'

I frown. Grayson, loving me. He is just looking for a new toy - a handy new toy that he can lie in and do nondescript things. My heart sinks painfully.

This is the reality.

'He came here to fuck me, that is all.'

'Who said romance was dead?' she whispers in horror. I was shocked Maury. I did not think it was possible. I shrug my shoulders to apologize.

'He uses sex as a weapon.'

'Fuck you in submission?' She shakes her head in disapproval. I blink quickly at her, and I can feel the blush spreading across my face. Oh... spot-on, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mary Smith.

'Naddalin, I don't understand, did you just let him make love to you?'

'No, Maury, we do not have sex - we fuck - Grayson's terminology. He does not have sex.'

'I knew there was something weird about him. He is having engagement issues.'

I nod, as if in agreement. Internally, I am longing. Oh, Murr... I wish I could tell you everything, all about this weird, sad, perverted guy, and you could tell me to forget about him. Keep me from being a fool.

'I guess it's all a little overwhelming,' I whisper. That is the understatement of the year. Because I do not want to talk about Grayson anymore, I ask him about Jack. All of Maury's demeanor changes at the mere mention of her name, she lights up from within, beaming at me

'He's coming early Saturday to help load.' She hugged the hairbrush, the boy misunderstood her, and I felt a faint, familiar urge. Maury has found herself a normal man and she looks so happy.

I turn around and hug her.

'Oh, I meant. Your dad called while you were... uh, busy. Bob suffered an injury, so he and your mom cannot graduate. But your dad will be here on Thursday. He will be here on Thursday. wants to call you.'

'Oh... my mom never called me. Is Bob okay?'

'Yes. Call her tomorrow morning. It is late now.'

'Thanks, Maury. I am fine now. I will call Ray in the morning too. I think I will just surrender.' She smiles, but her eyes narrow in the corners with concern.

After he leaves, I sit down and reread the contract, taking more notes as I go. When I am done, I turn on the laptop, ready to answer.

There is an email from Grayson in my inbox.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 23, 2009 11:16 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

I look forward to receiving your notes on the contract.

Until then, sleep well baby.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Problems

Date: May 24, 2009 12:02 AM

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

Here is my list of problems. I look forward to discussing this in more detail at dinner on Wednesday.

The numbers refer to clauses:

- I do not know why this is only for MY benefit - ie to explore MY sensuality and my limits. I am sure I would not need a ten-page contract to do this! This is surely for YOUR benefit.

- As you know, you are my only sex partner. I am not on drugs and have not had a blood transfusion. I am safe. What do you think?
- I can cancel at any time if I do not think you are sticking to the agreed limits. All right - I like it.

• Obey yourself in all things Accept your discipline without hesitation
We need to talk about it.

- One-month trial period. Not three.
- I cannot commit to every weekend. I have a life or I will have a life.

Three out of four.

- Use my body as you see fit sexually or otherwise - please define 'or otherwise'.
- This whole disciplinary clause. I am not sure I want to be whipped, flogged, or bodily punished. I am convinced that this would be contrary to Articles 2 to 5. And 'for any other reason. It is just mean - and you told me you were not a sadist.
 - For example, loaning me to someone else would be an option. But I am glad it is here in black and white.
 - The rules. More information on these later.
 - Touch me without your permission. What is the deal with that? You know I do not do it anyway.
- Discipline - Please see clause 15.5 above.
- I cannot look you in the eye, why?
- Why can't I touch you?

Rules:

Sleep - I agree to 6 hours. Food - I do not eat food on a prescribed list. The Food List Goes Where I Do - Deal breaker. Clothes - if I just must wear your clothes when I am with you... okay. Exercise - We agreed on 3 hours, which says another 4.

Soft limits:

Can we go through all of this? No fisting of any kind. What are Genital Clamps - you are kidding me.

Can you please let me know the arrangements for Wednesday I am working until 5 pm that day?

Good night.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 24, 2009 12:07 AM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

It is an extensive list. Why are you still standing?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Burn Midnight Oil

Date: May 24, 2009 12:10 am

To: Grayson Maury

Sir...?...

If you remember I was going through this list when I was distracted and bedridden by a manic passage of control.

Good evening.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stop Burning Midnight Oil

Date: May 24, 2009 12:12 AM

To: Naddalin Black

GO TO BED Naddalin.

Grayson Murray

CEO and Control Freak, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Oh... garish capitals! I go out. How can he intimidate me when he is ten kilometers away?

I shake my head. My heart still heavy, I climb into bed and instantly fall into a deep but troubled sleep.

The next day, I call my mother when I come home from work. It was a peaceful day at the Eastwood's, leaving me too much time to think. I am flustered, nervous about my confrontation with Mr. Control Freak tomorrow, and deep down I am worried that I was too negative in my response to the contract. He will undo it all.

My mother is in a grip of contrition, desperately sorry that I did not graduate. Bob has twisted a ligament, which means he is drinking all over the place. Honestly, he is as accident-prone as I am. He is expected to heal completely, but that means he is resting, and my mom must wait for his sore hand and foot.

'Naddalin honey, I'm so sorry,' my mom moaned over the phone.

'Mom, it is okay. Ray will be there.'

'Naddalin, you sound distracted - are you okay, baby?'

'Yes, mom,' Oh if you only knew. There is an extremely rich guy that I have met and he wants weird, kinky kind of sex that I have no say in.

'Did you meet any?

'No mother.' I am not going there now.

'Well, honey, I will be thinking of you on Thursday. I love you... you know that honey?' I close my eyes, his precious words give me a warm glow inside.

'I love you too, mom. Say hello to Bob, and I hope he is better soon.'

'I will do it, honey. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye.'

I got lost in my room with the phone. Lazily, I turn on the average machine and launch the mail program. There is an email from Grayson late last night or exceedingly early this morning, depending on your perspective. My heart rate instantly increases and I hear blood pumping into my ears. Holy shit... he said no - that is it - he is canceling dinner. The thought is so painful. I quickly reject it and open the email.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your problems

Date: May 24, 2009, 1:27 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

After my closer examination of your problems, may I draw your attention to the definition of submissive?

Submissive [s uhb-mis-iv] - adjective 1. inclined or ready to submit; obedient without resistance or humbly: submissive servants. Marked by or indicating submission: a submitted response.

Origin: 1580 - 90; submit + -ive

Synonyms: 1. treatable, compliant, flexible, adaptable. 2. passive, resigned, patient, docile, tame, submissive. Antonyms: 1. rebellious, disobedient.

Please keep this in mind at our Wednesday meeting.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

My first feeling is a feeling of relief. He is ready to at least discuss my issues, and he still wants to meet tomorrow. After reflection, I answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: My problems... What about your problems?

Date: May 24, 2009 6:29 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Sir...?...

Please note the original date: 1580-90. I respectfully remind Monsieur that it is 2009. We have come a long way since then.

May I offer you a definition to consider for our meeting: compromise [kom-pr uh-mahrez] - noun

1. settlement of disputes by mutual concessions; an agreement obtained by adjusting claims, principles, etc. contradictory or opposed, by reciprocal modification of requests. 2. the result of such settlement. 3. Something in between different things: the split-level is a compromise between a ranch house and a house with several floors. Endangerment, esp. reputation; exposure to danger, suspicion, etc.: a compromise on its integrity.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: What about my problems?

Date: May 24, 2009 6:32 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Good point, well done, as always, Miss Black. I will pick you up from your apartment tomorrow at 7:00 am.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: 2009 - Women can drive

Date: May 24, 2009 6:40 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Mr._ I have a car. I can drive.

I would rather meet you somewhere.

Where am I going to meet you?

At your hotel at 7:00 am?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stubborn Young Women

Date: May 24, 2009 6:43 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I am referring to my email dated May 24, 2009, sent at 1:27 am and to the definition contained therein.

Do you ever think you can do as you are told?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Intractable Men

Date: May 24, 2009 6:49 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Mr. Maury

I would like to drive.

Please.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Exasperated Men

Date: May 24, 2009 6:52 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Fine.

My hotel at 7:00 a.m.

I will meet you at the Marble Bar.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

He is even cranky by email. Doesn't he understand that I need to get away quickly? Not that my Beetle is fast... but still - I need a way to escape.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Men not so intractable

Date: May 24, 2009 6:55 PM

To: Grayson Maury

Thank you.

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Exasperating Women

Date: May 24, 2009 6:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black From

Nothing.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I call Ray, who is about to watch the Sounders play for a Salt Lake City football team, so our conversation is thankfully short. He is in the car Thursday to graduate. He wants to take me for a meal afterward. My heart swells as I speak to Ray, and a huge lump tightens in my throat. He has been my constant through mom's romantic difficulties. We have a special bond that I treasure. Even though he is my stepdad, he always treated me like his, and I cannot wait to see him. It has been too long. His quiet courage is what I need now, what I miss. I can channel my Inner Ray for my meeting tomorrow.

Maury and I focus on the packaging, sharing a bottle of cheap red wine as we do. When I finally go to bed, having almost finished preparing my room, I feel calmer. The physical activity of boxing everything was a welcome distraction, and I am tired. I want a good night's sleep. I snuggle up in my bed and fall asleep soon.

Paul is back from Princeton before leaving for New York to begin an internship with a finance company Pittsburgh. He follows me around the store all day to ask for an appointment. It is boring.

'Paul, for the hundredth time, I have a date tonight.'

'No you do not, you just say that to avoid me. You always avoid me.'

Yes... you would think you understood the hint.

'Paul, I never thought it was a good idea to go out with the boss's brother.'

'You end up here on Friday. You do not work tomorrow.'

'And I'll be in New York on Saturday and you'll be in New York soon.' We could not get much further away if we tried. Besides, I have an appointment tonight.

'With Sam?

'No.'

'Which then?'

'Paul... oh. My sign is exasperated. He will not let go. 'Grayson Murray'. I cannot help the boredom in my voice. But it does the trick. Paul's mouth opens, and he opens my mouth open, has gone mute. Humph - even his name makes people speechless.

'You have a date with Grayson Maury,' he said finally once he got over the shock. Disbelief is evident in his voice.

'Yes.'

'I see.' Paul looks downright taken aback, even stunned, and an exceedingly small part of him wants him to find it a surprise. My inner goddess too. She makes him a very vulgar and unattractive gesture with her fingers.

After that he ignores me, and at five o'clock I am out, quickly.

Maury lent me two dresses and two pairs of shoes for tonight and graduation tomorrow. I wish I could feel more excited about clothes and go the extra mile, but clothes just are not my thing. What is your thing, Naddalin Grayson's whispered question haunts me. Shaking my head and trying to calm my nerves, I choose the plum-colored sheath dress for tonight. It is wise and vaguely professional - after all, I am negotiating a contract.

I shower, I shave my legs and armpits, I wash my hair, then I spend a good half an hour drying it so that it falls in soft waves on my breasts and down my back. I slide a comb-over to keep one side of my face and apply mascara and lip gloss. I rarely wear makeup - it intimidates me. None of my literary heroes have had to put on makeup - I might know more if they had. I put on the plum stiletto heels to match the dress, and I am ready at six-thirty.

'Good?' I ask Maury.

She smiles.

'Boy, you scrub well, Naddalin.' She nods approvingly. 'You look sexy.'

'Hot! I am aiming for a sober and professional attitude.'

'That too, but mostly hot. The dress really suits you and your coloring. The way it hangs.' She smiles.

'Maury! Is cold.'

'Just to keep it true, Naddalin. The whole package - looks good. Keep the dress on. You will eat it out of your hand.'

My mouth presses into a hard line. Oh, you got it the wrong way.

'Wish me good luck.'

'Do you need luck on a date?' His brow furrows, puzzled.

'Yes, Maury.

'Well, good luck.' She hugs me and I am through the front door.

I must drive barefoot - Wanda, my navy Beetle, was not designed to be driven by wearers of stilettos. I stop in front of the Heathman at precisely six fifty-eight and give my car keys to the valet to park. He looks askance at my Ladybug, but I ignore him. Taking a deep breath and mentally girding my loins, I walk towards the hotel.

Grayson is casually leaning against the bar, drinking a glass of white wine. He is dressed in his usual white linen shirt, black jeans, black tie, and black jacket. Her hair is still tousled. I sigh. Of course, he looks gorgeous. I stand for a few seconds at the entrance of the bar, looking at him, admiring the view. He is beyond the beautiful. He glances, nervously I think, towards the entrance and stops when he sees me. Blinking a few times, he then smiles a slow, lazy, sexy smile that leaves me speechless and all melted inside. Making a supreme effort not to bite my lip, I step forward aware that I, Naddalin Black of Clumsy Ville, wear stilettos. He graciously walks to meet me.

'You look beautiful,' he whispered, leaning in to kiss my cheek briefly. 'A dress, Miss Black. I approve. Taking my arm, he leads me to a secluded booth and waves to the waiter.

'What would you like to drink?'

My lips curl up in a quick, sly smile as I sit down and slip into the cabin - well, at least he is asking me to.

'I'll get what you have, please.' See! I can play nicely and behave.

Amused, he orders another glass of Sancerre and slips in front of me.

'They have a great wine cellar here,' he said, tilting his head to the side.

Resting his elbows on the table, he crossed his fingers over her beautiful mouth, his gray eyes alive with an unreadable emotion. And that is there... that familiar attraction and load coming from him, it connects somewhere deep inside me.

I move uncomfortably under his shruti Pittsburgh, my heart pounding. I must keep my cool.

'Are you nervous?' He asks softly.

'Yes.'

He leans forward.

'Me too,' he whispers conspiratorially. My eyes shoot up to meet him. Him. Nervous.

Never, I blink at him, and he smiles his adorable, lopsided smile at me. The waiter arrives with my wine, a small dish of mixed nuts, and another of olives.

'So, how are we going to do this?' I ask. 'Go through my points one by one?'

'Impatient as always, Miss Black.'

'Well, could I ask you what you thought of the weather today?'

He smiles and his long fingers bend down to pick up an olive. He puts it in his mouth, and my eyes linger over his mouth, that mouth, that has been on me... all parts of me. I rinse.

'I thought the weather wasn't great today,' he said with a smirk.

'Are you smiling at me, Mr. Maury?'

'I am, Miss Black.'

'You know this contract is legally unenforceable.'

'I am fully aware of this, Miss Black.'

'Were you going to tell me that at some point?'

He frowns.

'You would think I would force you to do something you do not want to do and then pretend I have a legal hold on you?'

'Well yes.'

'You don't think very well of me at all, do you?'

'You didn't answer my question.'

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'Naddalin, it does not matter if it is legal or not. This represents an arrangement that I would like to make with you - what I would like from you and what you can expect from me. If you do not like it, then do not sign. If you sign and then decide you do not like it, there are enough exit clauses that you can walk away from it. Even if it were legally binding, do you think I would take you through the courts if you did decide to show up? '

I take a long sip of my wine. My subconscious hits me hard on the shoulder. You must keep the spirit on you. Do not drink too much.

'Such relationships are built on honesty and trust,' he continues. 'If you don't trust me - trust me to know how I affect you, how far I can go with you, how far I can take you - if you can't be honest with me then we really can't do that.'

Oh my gosh, we got right to the point quickly. How far he can take me. Holy shit. What does it mean?

'So, it is simple, Naddalin. Do you trust me or not?' His eyes are burning, fervent. 'Have you had similar discussions with uh... the fifteen?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because, they were all established submissives. They knew what they wanted out of a relationship with me and what I expected. With them it was just a matter of fine-tuning the soft boundaries, details like it.'

'Is there a store you go to, Submissive R Us?'

He is laughing.

'Not exactly.'

'Then how?'

'Is that what you want to discuss or do we need to get down to business with your problems, as you say.'

I swallow. Do I trust him? Does it all boil down to - trust, surely it should be a two-way street. I remember his snot when I called Sam.

'You are hungry?' he asks, distracting me from my thoughts.

Oh no... food.

'No.'

'Did you eat today?'

I am watching him. Honesty... Holy shit, he will not appreciate my answer.

'No.' My voice is small.

He narrows his eyes.

'You must eat, Naddalin. We can eat here or in my suite. What do you prefer?

'I think we should stay in public, on neutral ground.'

He smiles Saraindonically.

'Do you think that would stop me?' he said softly, a sensual warning.

My eyes widen and I swallow again.

'I hope.'

'Come on, I booked a private dining room. No audience.' He smiles enigmatically at me and leaves the cabin, holding out his hand.

'Bring your own wine,' he whispers.

Placing my hand in his, I slip in and stand next to him. He frees me and his hand reaches my elbow. He leads me back through the bar and climbs the grand stairs to a mezzanine. A young man in full Heathman livery approaches us.

'Mr. Maury, over here sir.

We follow him through a plush seating area to an intimate dining room. Just an isolated table. The bedroom is small but sumptuous. Under a sparkling chandelier, the table is all in starched linen, crystal glasses, silver cutlery, and a bouquet of white roses. Old-fashioned and sophisticated charm permeates the paneled room. The waiter pulls out my chair and I sit down. He places my towel on my lap. Grayson is sitting across from me. I look at him: 'Don't bite your lip,' he whispers.

I frown. Damn it. I do not even know I am doing it.

'I have already ordered. Hope you do not mind.'

Frankly, I am relieved I am not sure I can make any other decisions.

'No, it's okay,' I agree.

'It is good to know that you can be docile. Now, where were we?

'The most concrete.' I take another big sip of the wine. It is delicious. Grayson Maury makes wine well. I remember the last sip of wine he gave me in my bed. I blushed at the intrusive thought.

'Yes, your problems.' He rummages in the inside pocket of his jacket and pulls out a piece of paper.

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My email.

'Clause 2. Okay. It is in both of our interests. I will rephrase.'

I blink at him. Holy shit... we are going to go through each of these points one by one. I do not feel so brave face to face. He looks so serious. I hang in there with another sip of my wine. Grayson continues.

'My sexual health. Well, all my previous partners have had blood tests, and I do regular tests every six months for any health risks you mention. All my recent tests are clear. never used drugs. In fact, I am staunchly anti-drugs. I have a strict no-tolerance policy on drugs for all my employees, and I insist on random drug testing.'

Wow... the controlled madness has gone mad. I blink at him shocked.

'I have never had a blood transfusion. Does that answer your question?'

I nod, impassive.

'Your next point I mentioned earlier. You can leave anytime, Naddalin. I will not stop you. If you do, though - that is it. Just so you know.'

'Alright,' I replied softly. If I go, that is all. The thought is surprisingly painful.

The server arrives with our first course. How can I eat the Holy Moses? He ordered oysters on a bed of ice.

'Hope you like oysters.' Grayson's voice is soft.

'I never had one.' Never.

'Good.' He hits one. 'All you do is tip and Swallow. I think you can get this done. He looks at me and I know what he is talking about. I blush scarlet. He smiles at me, squirts lemon juice on his oyster, then pours it into his mouth.

'Hmm, delicious. Taste of the sea,' he smirked at me. 'Go ahead,' he encourages.

'So, I am not chewing it?

'No, Naddalin, you don't.' His eyes are full of humor. He looks so young like that. I bite my lip and his expression instantly changes. He looks at me sternly. I reach out and pick up my very first oyster. All right... nothing is going on. I throw some lemon juice on it and spill it. It slips down my throat, all the seawater, salt, the sharp citrus flavor, and flesh... ooh. I lick my lips, and he looks at me intently, his eyes clouded.

'Good?'

'I'll have another one,' I said dryly.

'Good girl,' he said proudly.

'Did you choose them deliberately, aren't they known for their aphrodisiac qualities?' 'No, this is the first item on the menu. I do not need an aphrodisiac near you. You know it, and you react the same near me', he said simply, 'So where were we?' He glances at my email as I search for another oyster.

He reacts in the same way. I affect him... wow.

'Obey me in all things. Yes, I want you to do this. I need you to do this. Think of it like a role play Naddalin.'

'But I'm afraid you will hurt me.'

'How did you hurt?'

'Physically.' And emotionally.

'Do you really think I would do this Beyond any limit you can't take?'

'You said you had hurt someone before.'

'Yes, I did. It was a long time ago.'

'How did you hurt them?'

'I hung them from my playroom ceiling. That is one of your questions.

Hanging - that is what the carabiners are. Are in the playroom rope game
One of the ropes was tied too tightly. '

I hold my hand begging him to stop.

'I do not need to know anymore. So you will not suspend me then? '

'Not if you really do not want to. You can make it a hard limit.'

'Okay.'

'So Obey, do you think you can get this done?'

He looks at me, his intense gray eyes. The seconds tick away.

'I could try,' I whisper.

'Well.' He smiles. 'Now run. One month instead of three is not the time at all, especially if you want a weekend away from me every month. I do not think I will be able to stay away from you during this time. I can barely do it now,' he pauses.

Can't he stay away from me? What?

'How about, one day out of a weekend a month you happen to yourself - but I have a midweek night this week?'

'Okay.'

'And please let us try it for three months. If it is not for you then you can go to Pittsburgh time.'

'Three months?' I feel confused. I take another sip of the wine and offer myself another oyster. I could learn to like it.

'The property thing is just terminology and goes back to the principle of obeying. It is to put you in the right frame of mind, to understand where I am from.'

-And-

I want you to know that as soon as you cross my submission threshold, I will do what I love for you. You must accept this and willingly. That is why you must trust me.

I am going to fuck you, anytime, anyway, I want - where I want. I am going to discipline you because you are going to screw it up. I will train you to please me. But I know you have never done this before.

At first, we will take it slow and I will help you. We will build it in various scenarios. I want you to trust me, but I know I must earn your trust, and I will. The 'or otherwise- again, this is to help you get into the state of mind, it means anything goes.'

He is so passionate, fascinating. It is his obsession, the way he is... I cannot take my eyes off him. He wants it. He stops talking and looks at me.

'Always with me?' He whispers, his voice rich, warm, and alluring. He takes a sip of his wine, his penetrating gaze holding mine.

The waiter comes to the door, and Grayson subtly nods allowing the waiter to clear our table.

'Would you like some more wine?'

'I have to drive.'

'A little water then?'

I agree.

'Still or sparkling?'

'Sparkling,'

The waiter leaves.

'You are very calm,' Grayson whispers.

'You are very talkative.'

He smiles.

'Discipline. There is an exceptionally fine line between pleasure and pain Naddalin. They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other. I can show you how painful the pain is. can be nice. You do not believe me now, but that is what I mean about trust. There will be pain, but nothing you cannot handle. Again, that is a question trust me. Do you trust me, Naddalin? '

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Naddalin!

'Yes, I do.' I answer spontaneously, without thinking... because it is true - I trust him.

'Well,' he looks relieved. 'The rest of this stuff is just details.'

'Important details.'

'Okay, let's talk about it.'

My head floats with all his words. I should have brought Maury's mini-disc player so I could listen to this. There is so much information, so much to process. The waiter reappears with our main dishes: black cod, asparagus, and mashed potatoes with a hollandaise sauce. I have never felt less to eat.

'I hope you like fish,' Grayson said softly.

I stab my food and take a long glass of sparkling water. I vehemently wish it were wine.

'The rules. Let us talk about it. Is food a deciding factor?'

'Yes.'

'May I edit it to say that you will eat at least three meals a day?'

'No.' I am not backing down. No one is going to tell me what to eat.

How I fuck, yes, but eat... no, no way.

He tightens his lips.

'I need to know that you are not hungry.'

I frown. Why?

'You will have to do it. Trust me.'

He looks at me for a moment, and he relaxes.

'Touch, Miss Black,' he said quietly, 'I concede food and sleep.'

'Why can't I look at you?'

'That's it. A Dom / sub thing. You will get used to it.'

Do I want... this?

'Why can't I touch you?'

'Because you can't.'

His mouth attaches in a mulish line.

'Is it because of Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

He looks mockingly at me.

'Why do you think that? And immediately he understands. 'Do you think she trauma-mated me? '

I nod my head.

'No Naddalin. This is not the reason. Besides, Mrs. MLF stiflers mom would not take anyof that shit from me. '

Oh... but I must do it. I sulk.

'So nothing to do with it.'

'No. And I do not want you touching each other, either.'

What Ah yes, the non-masturbation clause.

'Out of curiosity... why?'

'Because, I want all of your pleasure,' her voice is hoarse but determined.

Oh... I do not have an answer to that. On one level it is up there with 'I wanna bite that lip', on another, it is so selfish. I frown and take a bite of cod, trying to mentally assess what concessions I've 'won.' food, sleep, I can look him in the eye. it is going to take it slow, and we have not discussed the soft limits. But I am not sure I can cope with that with the food.

'I' gave you a lot to think about, didn't I? '

'Yes.'

'Do you also want to cross the soft boundaries now?'

'Not during dinner.'

He smiles.

'Squeamish?'

' Something like that. '

'You haven't eaten much.'

'I have enough.'

'Three oysters, four bites of cod and a stalk of asparagus, no potatoes, no nuts, no olives, and you have not eaten it all day. You said I could trust you. '

Damn it. He kept an inventory.

'Grayson, please, it's not everyday that I sit in conversations like this.'

'I need you to be fit and healthy Naddalin.'

' I know. '

'And... now- I want to take you off that dress.'

I swallow. Peel me off Maury's dress. I feel the pull deep in my stomach.
The muscles I know better now tighten at his words. But I

I cannot have this. His most powerful weapon, used against me again. He is so good at sex - although I understood that. 'I don't think that's a good idea,' I whisper.
'We didn't have dessert.'

'Um, do you want a dessert? He sniffs.

'Yes.'

'You could be dessert,' he whispers suggestively.

'I'm not sure I'm gentle enough.'

Naddalin, you are deliciously sweet. I know. '

'Grayson. You are using sex as a weapon. It is not fair.' I whisper, looking at my hands, then looking directly at him. He raises his eyebrows, surprised, and I see him reflecting on me. words. 'He strokes his chin thoughtfully.

' You are right.. I do. In life, you use what you know, Naddalin. It does not change how much I want you. Here. Now. '

How can he seduce me just with his voice? I am already panting - my hot blood running through my veins, my nerves are tingling.

'I would like to try something,' he hisses.

I frown. He just gave me a shot of ideas to deal with and now this.

'If you were my sub, you would not have to think about it. It would be easy.'
Her voice is soft, alluring. 'All these decisions - all the tiring thought processes behind them. Is this the right thing to do? Can it happen here?

You would not have to worry about any of these details. This is what I would do as your Dom. And now I know you want me, Naddalin.'

My frown deepened. How can he tell?

'I can say it because...'

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Holy shit, he is answering my unspoken question. Is he also psychic?

'... Your body is abandoning you. You press your thighs together, you are flushed and your breathing has changed.'

Oh, this is too much.

'How do you know about my thighs?' My voice is low, incredulous. They are under the table for heaven's sake.

'I felt the slick move, and that is a calculated guess based on years of experience.'

I am right, am I not?'

I blush and look at my hands. That is what bothers me in this game of seduction. He is the only one who knows and understands the rules. I am too naive and inexperienced. My only sphere of reference is Maury, and she does not take any shit from men. My other references are all fictitious: Elizabeth Bennett would be outraged, Jane Eyre too scared and Tess would succumb, just like me.

'I haven't finished my cod.'

'Do you prefer cold cod to me?'

My head rises to stare at him, and his gray eyes burn molten silver, with compelling need.

'I thought you liked me cleaning my plate.'

'Right now, Miss Black, I couldn't give a fuck about your food.'

'Grayson. You just do not fight.'

'I know. I have never done it.'

My inner goddess frowns at me. You can do that, she cuddles - plays this sex god at his own game. May I well. What to do My inexperience is an albatross around my neck.

Pick up an asparagus spear, I look at him and bite my lip. Then, very slowly, I put the tip of my cold asparagus in my mouth and I suck it. Eyes of Grayson widens ad infinitum, but I notice.

'Naddalin. What are you doing?'

I bite the end.

'I eat my asparagus.'

Grayson moves in his seat.

'You are playing with me, Miss Black.'

I pretend innocent.

'I'm just finishing my food, Mr. Maury.'

The waiter chooses this moment to knock and, spontaneously, enter. He throws a brief coup d' eye in Grayson, who frowns and nods, then the server clears our plates. The arrival of the waiter broke the spell. And I seize this precious moment of clarity. I must go. Our meeting will only end one way if I stay, and I need some boundaries after such an intense conversation. As much as my body longs for his touch, my mind rebels. I need some distance to think about everything he said. I still have not decided, and her sexual allure and prowess do not make it any easier.

'Would you like a dessert?' Grayson asks, never sir, but his eyes still flare.

'No, thanks. I think I should go.' I look at my hands.

'Come on?' He could not hide his surprise.

The waiter leaves in a hurry.

'Yes.' It is the right decision. If I stay here, in this room with him, he is going to fuck me. I stand up, resolutely. 'We both have the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh tomorrow.'

Grayson automatically rises, revealing years of ingrained civility.

'I don't want you to go.'

'Please... I must do it.'

'Why?

'Because you've given me so much to consider... and I need a little distance.'

'I could make you stay,' he threatens.

'Yes, you could easily, but I do not. Want you to.'

He runs his hand through his hair, looking at me intently.

'You know, when you fell into my office to question me, you were all yes sir, no sir.'

I thought you were a natural-born submissive. But frankly, Naddalin, I am not sure you have a delicious submission bone in your body. 'He walks slowly over to me as he speaks, his voice strained.

'You might be right,' I breathe.

'I want the opportunity. To explore the possibility of you doing it,' he whispered, staring at me. He reaches out and strokes my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip, 'I do not know any other way, Naddalin. This is who I am.'

'I know.'

He leans in to kiss me, but stops before his lips touch mine, his eyes searching mine, wanting, asking permission. I lift my lips to him, and he kisses me and because I do not know if I will kiss him someday, I let go - my hands move on their own and twist in his hair, pulling him towards him. me, my mouth opening, my tongue

stroking hers. His hand gripped the nape of my neck as he deepened the kiss, responding to my ardor. His other hand slides down my back and flattens out at the base of my spine as he pushes me against his body. 'Can't I persuade you to stay?' he breathes between two kisses.

'no'

'Spend the night with me.'

'And not touch you No.' '

He moans.

'You impossible girl. He pulls back, looking at me. 'Why do you say goodbye to me?'

'Because, I'm leaving now.'

'That's not what I mean, and you know it.'

'Grayson, I must think about it. I do not know if I can have the kind of relationship you want.'

He closes his eyes and presses his forehead against mine, giving us both a chance to slow our breathing. After a while, he kisses my forehead, takes a deep breath, his nose in my hair, then pulls me back.

'As you wish, Miss Black,' he said, his face straight. 'I will escort you to the lobby.'

He holds out his hand. Leaning down, I take my purse and put my hand in hers. Holy shit, that could be it. I follow him obediently on the main staircase and in the hall, my scalp pricks me, my blood flows. It could be the last goodbye if I decide to say no.

My heart contracts painfully in my chest. What a turnaround. How different a moment of clarity can make for a girl.

'Do you have your valet ticket?'

I dig into my wallet and give him the ticket, which he gives to the porter. I watch him while we wait.

'Thanks for dinner,' I whisper.

'It's a pleasure as always, Miss Black,' he said politely, though he looked deep in thought, completely distracted.

Looking at him, I remember his beautiful profile. The idea that I may never see him again haunts me, intrusive and too painful to contemplate. He turns abruptly, staring at me, his expression intense.

'You're moving to New York this weekend. If you make the right decision, can I see you on Sunday?' He looks hesitant.

'We'll see. ' I breathe. Momentarily, he looks relieved, then frowns.

'It's cooler now, don't you have a jacket?'

'No.

He shakes his head in irritation and removes his jacket.

'Here. I do not want you to catch a cold.

I blink at him as he holds it open, and as I hold my arms behind me, I remember the time in his office where he slipped my coat over my shoulders - the first time I did. met - and the effect it had on me then. Nothing has changed it is more intense.

His jacket is warm, way too big and it smells good. Oh my... delicious.

My car stops outside. Grayson's mouth opens.

'Is that what you drive?' He is appalled. Taking my hand, he leads me outside. The valet jumps up and hands me my keys, and Grayson coolly gives him some money.

'Does it work?' He is looking at me now.

'Yes.'

'Is this going to happen in New York?'

'Yes she will.'

'Without issue?'

'Yes,' I crack, exasperated. 'Okay, she is old. But she is mine, and she is in working order.'

My stepfather bought me.'

'Oh, Naddalin, I think we can do better than that.'

'What do you mean?' The realization is emerging. 'You're not buying me a car.'

He looks at me, his jaw strained.

'We'll see,' he said firmly.

9

He grimaces as he opens the driver's door and helps me in. I take off my shoes and roll down the window. He looks at me, his unfathomable expression, his dark eyes.

'Drive carefully,' he said softly.

'Goodbye, Grayson. My voice is hoarse from unsold, unshed tears - jeez, I am not gonna cry. I give him a small smile.

As I walk away, my chest tightens, my tears start to flow, and I stifle a sob.

Soon tears are streaming down my face, and I do not understand why I am crying. I was holding mine. He explained everything. It was clear. He wants me, but the truth is, I need more. I need him to want me the way I want him and I need him, and deep down I know that is not possible. I am just overwhelmed.

I do not even know how to categorize it. If I do this thing... will he be my boyfriend?

Will I be able to present it to my friends? Go out to bars, to the cinema, even to the bowling alley, with him? The truth is, I do not think I will. He will not let me touch him and he will not let me sleep with him. I know I have not had these things in my past, but I want them in my future.

And- that is not the future he envisions.

And- if I say yes, and in three months he says no, he has had enough of trying to mold me into something I am not. How am I going to feel? I will have emotionally invested three months, doing things that I am not sure I want to do. And if he then says no, okay, how could I deal with that level of rejection? It is best to step back now with the self-esteem that I have intact.

But the idea of never seeing him again is distressing. How did it get under my skin so quickly? It cannot be just sex... I can make the tears flow from my eyes. I do not want to examine my feelings for him. I am afraid of what I will find out if I do. What am I going to do?

I- park in front of our duplex. No lights on. Maury must be out. I am relieved. I do not want her to catch me crying again. As I undress, I wake up the nasty machine, and sitting in my inbox is a message from Grayson.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Tonight

Date: May 25, 2009 10:01 PM

To: Naddalin Black

I- do not understand why you ran tonight. I hope that all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. I know that I have given you a lot to contemplate and I fervently hope that you will give my proposal thoughtful consideration. I want this to work. We are going to take it slow.

Believe me.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Her email makes me cry more. I am not a fusion. I am not an acquisition. Reading this, I might as well be. I do not answer. I do not know what to say to him. I dig through my pajamas and wrap his jacket around me. I climb into my bed. As I lay there staring in the dark, I think of all the times he warned me to stay away.

'Naddalin, you should get away from me. I am not the man for you.

'I do not do the girlfriend thing.

'I am not a heart-and-flower guy.

'I am not making love.

'That's all I know.

...And as I cry silently into my pillow, it is that last idea I cling to. That is all I know too.

We can together chart a new course.

Grayson stands above me, grabbing a braided leather whip. He is wearing old, faded, torn Levis and that is it. He slowly slides the crop into his palm as he looks at me. He is smiling, triumphant. I can not move. I am naked and chained, stretched out on a large four-poster bed. Reaching out, he drags the tip of the crop from my forehead down the length of my nose, so I can smell the leather, and over my parted, panting lips.

He pushes the tip into my mouth so I can taste the smooth, rich leather.

'Suck,' he orders in a soft voice. My mouth closes over the tip as I obey.

'Enough,' he snaps.

I am panting once more as he pulls the crop out of my mouth, drags it down and under my chin, down my neck to the hollow at the base of my throat. He spins it slowly over there, then continues to slide the tip down my body, down my breastbone, between my breasts, down my chest to my belly button. I gasped, squirmed, tugged at my fasteners biting into my wrists and ankles. It swirls the tip around my belly button then continues to drag the leather tip south, through my pubic hair to my clit. He brushes the crop and hits my sweet spot with a loud slap, and I come, gloriously, to cry out for my release.

Suddenly, I wake up, out of breath, covered in sweat, and feeling the aftershocks of my orgasm. Good heavens. I am completely disoriented. What just happened? I am alone in my room. How am I sitting upright, shocked... wow. It is morning. I glance at my alarm clock - eight o'clock. I put my head in my hands. I did not know I could dream of sex. Is this something that I ate? Maybe oysters and my

internet research manifested in my first wet dream. It is disconcerting. I had no idea that I could have an orgasm while I was sleeping.

Maury walks around the kitchen when I stagger in.

'Naddalin, it is okay. You look weird. Is that Grayson's jacket you are wearing?'

'I'm fine.' Damn, should have checked in the mirror. I avoid his piercing green eyes.

I am still in shock from the event of my morning. 'Yes, it's Grayson's jacket.'

She frowns.

'Did you sleep?

'Not very well.'

I walk over to the kettle. I need some tea.

'How was dinner?'

So-o it starts.

'We had oysters. Followed by cod, so I would say it was fishy.'

'Ugh... I hate oysters, and I do not want to know about food. How was Grayson doing?'

What did you talk about?

'He was paying attention,' I stopped.

What can I say? His HIV status is clear, he enjoys role-playing a lot, wants me to obey his every command, hurt someone he tied to his bedroom ceiling and wanted to fuck me in the dining room. private dining. Would that be a good summary? I am desperately trying to remember something from my meeting with Grayson that I can discuss with Maury.

'He does not approve of Wanda.

'Who does, Naddalin, that's old news. Why are you so shy, drop it, girlfriend.'

'Oh, Maury, we talked about a lot of things. You know - how difficult he is about food. Besides, he loved your dress.' The kettle has boiled, so I make myself some tea. 'Would you like some tea, would you like me to hear your speech for today?'

'Yes, please. I worked on it last night at Lilah's. I will get it. And yes, I would love some tea.' Maury runs out of the kitchen.

Phew, Mary Smith turned away. I slice a bagel and put it in the toaster. I blush as I remember my vivid dream. What was it?

Last night- like, I had trouble sleeping. My head was buzzing with assorted options. I am so confused. Grayson's idea of a relationship is more like a job offer. It has set schedules, a job description, and a strict grievance procedure. That is not how I envisioned my first romance - but, of course, Grayson does not romance. If I tell him I want more, he can say no... and I could jeopardize what he offered. And that is what worries me the most because I do not want to lose it. But I am not sure I have the stomach to be his submissive it is the canes and whips that put me off. I am a physical coward and will go far to avoid the pain. I think about my dream... this is what it would look like. My inner goddess is jumping up and down with cheerleader pom-poms screaming yes at me.

Maury returns to the kitchen with his laptop. I focus on my bagel and listen patiently as she goes through her Valedictorian speech.

I am dressed and ready when Ray arrives. I open the front door and he stands on the porch in his ill-fitting suit. A warm surge of gratitude and love for this uncomplicated man runs through me, and I throw my arms around him in an unusual display of affection. He is taken aback, perplexed.

'Hey, girly, nice to see you too,' he mumbles as he hugs me. Leaning back, his hands on my shoulders, he looks me up and down, frowning. 'Are you all right, kid?'

'Of course, dad, can't a girl be happy to see her old man?'

He smiles, his dark eyes narrowed in the corners, and follows me into the living room.

'You look good,' he said.

'It's Maury's dress.' I look at the Murray chiffon halterneck dress.

He frowns.

'Where's Maury?

'She's been on campus. She is giving a speech, so she must be early.'

'Should we be heading up?'

'Dad, we have half an hour. Would you like some tea? And you can tell me how everyone in Montesano is getting along. How did it go?'

Ray pulls his car into the campus parking lot, and we follow the stream of humanity dotted with ubiquitous black and red robes, toward the sports auditorium.

'Good luck, girly. You sound terribly nervous, do you have to do something?'

Holy shit... why did Ray choose today to be so observant?

'No, dad. It is a wonderful day.' And I will see it.

'Yes, my little girl graduated. I am proud of you, girly.'

'Aw... thank you Ray.' Oh, I love this man.

The sports auditorium is packed. Ray went to sit with the other parents and supporters on the incline bench, as I made my way to my seat. I wear my black dress and cap, and I feel protected by them, anonymous. There is nobody on stage yet, but I cannot calm down. My heart is beating and my breathing is shallow. He is here somewhere. I wonder if Maury is talking to him, questioning him.

I walk towards my seat among my fellow students whose names also begin with S. I am in the second row, which allows me even more Pittsburghmity. I glanced behind me and saw Ray sitting high in the stands. I give him a sign. He consciously gives me a half hello, a half hello in return. I sit down and wait.

The auditorium quickly fills up and the buzz of excited voices gets louder and louder. The row of seats in the front fills up. On either side of me, I am joined by two girls I do not know from a different faculty. They are close friends and they speak through me with enthusiasm.

At exactly eleven o'clock, the chancellor appears from behind the scene, followed by the three vice-chancellors, then the senior professors, all adorned with their black and red badges. We stand and applaud our teaching staff. Some teachers nod and bow, others seem bored. Professor Collins, my tutor and my favorite teacher look like he just fell out of bed as usual. The latest on stage are Maury and Grayson. Grayson stands out in his tailored gray suit, copper highlights glistening in his hair under the auditorium lights. He looks so serious and self-sufficient. As he sits down, he undoes his single-breasted jacket and I see his tie. Holy shit... that tie! I rub my wrists reflexively. I cannot take my eyes off him - his beauty as distracting as ever - and he is wearing this tie, no doubt on purpose. I can feel my mouth press into a hard line. The audience sits down and the applause ceases.

'Look at him!' One of the girls next to me is breathing enthusiastically at her friend.

'He is beautiful.'

I stiffen. I am sure they are not talking about Professor Collins.

'It must be Grayson Maury.'

'Is he single?'

I bristle.

'I don't think so,' I whisper.

'Oh.' The two girls look at me in surprise.

'I think he's gay,' I mumble.

'What a shame,' one of the girls moaned.

As the Chancellor rises and begins the proceedings with his speech, I watch Grayson subtly sweep the room. I sit in my seat, hunching my shoulders, trying to make myself as quiet as possible. I fail miserably as a second later his gray eyes find mine. He stares at me, his face impassive, completely impenetrable. I squirm uncomfortably, mesmerized by his gaze as a slow blush spread across my face. Unconstrained, I remember my dream from this morning, and the muscles in my stomach do the delicious thing of squeezing. I breathe in sharply. I can see the shadow

of a smile on his lips, but it is fleeting. He briefly closes his eyes and, opening them, resumes his indifferent expression.

After a glance at the Chancellor, he looks ahead, focusing on the OVHS emblem hanging above the entrance. He no longer looks at me. The Chancellor continues, and Grayson still is not looking at me, he is just staring straight ahead.

Why isn't he looking at me? He changed his mind? A wave of unease came over me. Maybe stepping on him last night was the end for him too. He is tired of waiting for me to make up my mind. Oh no, I could have blown it up completely. I remember his email last night. He is angry that I did not respond.

Suddenly- the hall erupts into applause as Miss Mary Smith takes the stage. The Chancellor sits down and Maury throws her beautiful long hair behind her as she places her papers on the desk. She takes her time, not intimidated by a thousand people watching her. She smiles when she is ready, looks up at the enthralled crowd, and launches eloquently into her speech. She is so composed and funny that the girls next to me have a blast at her first joke. Oh, Mary Smith, you can deliver a good line. I feel so proud of her at this point, my wandering thoughts on Grayson are pushed aside. Even though I have heard his speech before, I listen carefully. She controls the room and takes her audience with her.

Its theme is What Next After CollegeOh, what next indeed. Grayson looks at Maury, eyebrows slightly raised - in surprise, I think. Yes, it could have been Maury going to question him. And it could have been the Maury to whom he was now making indecent offers. Beautiful Maury and beautiful Grayson, together. I could be like the two girls next to me, admiring her from afar. I know Maury would not have told him the time of day.

What did she call him the other day? The thought of a confrontation between Maury and Grayson makes me uncomfortable. I have to say, I do not know where I would put my money.

Maury concludes his speech on a high note, and everyone stands up spontaneously, clapping and clapping, their first standing ovation. I beam and clap at her, and she smiles back at me. Excellent job, Maury. She sits down, so does the audience, and the Chancellor stands up and introduces Grayson... shit, Grayson is going to make a speech. The Chancellor briefly talks about Grayson's accomplishments: CEO of his own extraordinarily successful company, a truly self-made man.

'And also a major benefactor of our university, please welcome Mr. Grayson Maury.'

The Chancellor pumps Grayson's hand, and there is a wave of polite applause. My heart is in my throat. He approaches the lectern and examines the room. He looks so confident in front of all of us like Maury did before him. The two girls next to me lean in delight. I think most of the female audience members hook up and a few men. He begins, his voice soft, measured, and bewitching.

'I am deeply grateful and touched by the great compliment given to me by the authorities at OVHS today. It offers me a rare opportunity to speak about the impressive work of the Department of Environmental Sciences here at the University. Our objective is to develop through -effective and ecologically sustainable agricultural methods for third world countries; our goal is to help end hunger and poverty in the world. Over a billion people, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, live in abject poverty. Agricultural dysfunction is rampant in these parts of the world and the result is ecological and social destruction. I know what it is like to have a deep hunger. It is a very personal journey for me... '

My jaw drops to the ground. What Grayson was once Hungary. Holy shit. Well, that explains a lot. And I remember the interview; he wants to feed the world. I was racking my brains desperately to remember what Maury had written in his article. Adopted at four, I think. I cannot imagine Billie starving him, so it must have been before when he was a little boy. I swallow, my heart tightens at the thought of a hungry toddler with gray eyes.

Oh no. What kind of life did he have before the Maury's seized him and saved him?

I am gripped by a feeling of raw, poor, fucked up, perverted, philanthropic Grayson outrage - although I am sure he would not see himself that way and repel any thought of sympathy or pity. Suddenly everyone bursts into applause and gets up. I am good that I did not hear half of his speech. He does all these charitable deeds, runs a huge business, and sues me at the same time. It is overwhelming. I remember brief excerpts from conversations he had about Darfur... everything falls into place. Food.

He smiles briefly under the warm applause - Evan Maury clamps, then he resumes his seat. He is not looking my way, and I am shifted trying to assimilate this added information about him.

One of the vice-chancellors stands up and we begin the long and tedious process of collecting our diplomas. There are over four hundred to give out, and it takes a little over an hour before I hear my name. I go on stage between the two laughing girls.

Grayson looks at me, his gaze warm but reserved.

'Congratulations, Miss Black,' he said as he squeezed my hand, squeezing it gently. I feel a load of his flesh on mine. 'Are you having a problem with your laptop?'

I frown as he hands me my diploma.

'No.'

'So, you are ignoring my emails?'

'I only saw mergers and acquisitions.'

He looks at me questioningly.

'Later,' he said, and I must move on because I hold the line.

I return to my place. He must have sent another. What does that say?

The ceremony takes another hour to conclude. It is interminable. Finally, the Chancellor leads the faculty members off the stage to even more enthusiastic applause, preceded by Grayson and Maury. Grayson does not look at me, even though I want him to.

My inner goddess is not happy.

As I get up and wait for our argument to dissipate, Maury calls me. She walks up to me from behind the stage.

'Grayson wants to talk to you,' she shouts. The two girls who are now standing next to me turn and eclipse me.

'He sent me here,' she continues.

Oh...

'Your speech was great, Maury.'

'It was, wasn't it?' she shines. 'You come, he can be very pushy.' She rolls her eyes and I smile.

'You have no idea. I cannot leave Ray for long.' I glance at Ray and hold my fingers to indicate five minutes. He nods, nodding to me, and I am murmuring in the hallway behind the stage. Grayson speaks with the Chancellor and two members of the teaching staff. He looks up when he sees me.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' I hear him whisper. He comes over to me and smiles briefly at Maury.

'Thank you,' he says, and before she can answer he takes my elbow and leads me into what looks like a men's locker room. He checks to see if it is empty, then he locks the door. Holy shit, what is on his mind, I watch him as he turns on me.

'Why didn't you email me or text me back?' He glared at him. I am confused.

'I haven't looked at my computer today, nor my phone.' Damn, did he try to call? I try my distraction technique which is so effective on Maury. 'It was a great speech.'

'Thank you.'

'Explain to me your food problems.'

He runs a hand through his hair, exasperated.

'Naddalin, I don't want to go right now.' He closes his eyes, looking pained.

'I was worried about you.'

'Worried, why?'

'Because, you got home in that death trap, you call a car.'

'It is not a death trap. It is fine. Sam serves it to me regularly.'

'Sam, the photographer?' Grayson's eyes narrowed, his face frozen. Oh shit.

'Yes, the beetle belonged to its mother.'

'Yes, and probably her mother and mother before her. I am not sure.'

'I have been driving it for over three years. I am sorry you worried. Why didn't you call?' Jeez, he is reacting completely.

He takes a deep breath.

'Naddalin, I need an answer from you. This wait is driving me crazy.'

'Grayson, I... look, I left my stepfather alone.'

'Tomorrow. I want an answer by tomorrow.'

'Ok. Tomorrow I will tell you then.' I blink at him.

He pulls back, looks at me coldly, and his shoulders relax.

'Are you staying for a drink?' He asks.

'I don't know what Ray wants to do.'

'Your stepfather, I would like to meet him.'

Oh no, why?

'I'm not sure that's a good idea.'

Grayson unlocks the door, his mouth in a sinister line.

'Are you ashamed of me?'

'No!' It is my turn to sound exasperated. 'Introduce yourself to my dad like this is the man who deflowered me and wants us to start a BDSM relationship. You do not wear running shoes.'

Grayson looks at me, then his lips twist into a smile. And even though I am angry with him, my face is involuntarily drawn to a response smile.

'Just so you know, I can run fast. Just tell her I am your friend, Naddalin.'

He opens the door and I go out. My mind is spinning. The Chancellor, the three Vice-Chancellors, four professors, and Maury watch me as I hurriedly pass. Holy shit. When I leave Grayson with the faculty, I go in search of Ray.

Tell him I am your friend. Friend with benefits, my subconscious scowls. I know I know. I shake off that nasty thought. How am I going to introduce Ray to her? The room is still at least half full and Ray has not moved from his seat. He sees me, signals me, and goes downstairs.

'Hey, girly. Congratulations.' He puts his arm around me.

'Would you like to come and have a drink under the marquee?'

'Sure. It is your day. Show the way.'

'We don't have to do it if you don't want to.' Please say no...

'I just sat for two and a half hours listening to all kinds of chatter. I need a drink.'

I put my arm in his, and we walked around with the crowd in the early afternoon heat. We cross the line for the official photographer.

'Oh, that reminds me.' Ray takes a digital camera from his pocket. 'One for the album, girly.' I roll my eyes at him as he takes a picture of me.

'Can I take off the cap and the dress now, I'm feeling a little bit silly.'

You sound a little silly... my subconscious is at its best. So, are you going to introduce Ray to the man you are fucking? She looks at me over her wing-shaped glasses. He would be so proud. God, I hate her sometimes.

The marquee is huge and crowded - students, parents, teachers, and friends all chatting happily. Ray hands me a glass of champagne or some cheap sparkling wine, I guess. It is not fresh and it tastes sweet. My thoughts turn to Grayson... he will not like it.

'Naddalin! I turn around and Paul Smith hugs me. It makes me spin around, without spilling my wine, a feat.'

'Congratulations!' He beams at me, his green eyes twinkling.

What a surprise. Her dirty blonde hair was tousled and sexy. He is as handsome as Maury. The family resemblance is striking.

'Wow - Paul! Nice to see you. Dad, this is Paul, Maury's brother. Paul, this is my dad, Ray Black.' They shake hands, my father coolly assessing Mr. Smith.

'When did you come back from Europe?' I ask.

'I've been back for a week, but I wanted to surprise my little sister,' he said conspiratorially.

'This is so cute.' I smile at him.

'She's Valedictorian, couldn't miss that.' He looks immensely proud of his sister.

'She gave an excellent speech.'

'That's what she did,' Ray nods.

Paul has his arm around my waist as I gaze into Grayson Maury's frosty gray eyes. Maury is next to him.

'Hello, Ray,' Maury kisses Ray on both cheeks, making him blush. 'Have you met Naddalin's boyfriend Grayson Murray?' Holy shit... Maury! Shit! All the blood is flowing from my face. 'Mr. Black, it's a pleasure to meet you.' Grayson said softly, warmly, completely unfazed by Maury's introduction. He holds out his hand, which, to Ray's credit, Ray takes, not showing the slightest surprise he just gave him. Thank you very much, Mary Smith, I smoke. I think my subconscious has passed out. 'Mr. Maury,' Ray murmurs, his expression indecipherable except the slight widening of his large brown eyes. They slide across my face with a when-you-were-going-to-give-me-this-news look. I bite my lip. 'And this is my brother, Paul Smith.'

Maury said to Grayson. Grayson turns his arctic gaze on Paul, who still has an arm around me. 'Mr. Smith.' They shake hands. Grayson holds out his hand to me. 'Naddalin, baby,' he whispers, and I almost breathe out at the end. I step out of Paul's reach, while Grayson smiles at him coldly, and I take my place next to him. Maury smiles at me. She knows exactly what she is doing, the vixen! 'Paul, mum and dad wanted a word.' Maury drags Paul away. 'So how long have the children known each other?' Ray looks at me impassively from Grayson. The power of speech has abandoned me. I want the ground to swallow me up. Grayson puts his arm around me, his thumb brushing my bareback in a caress before his hand squeezes my shoulder. 'About a few weeks now,' he said softly. 'We met when Naddalin came to interview

me for the student magazine.' 'I did not know you were working on the student magazine, Naddalin. Ray's voice is a quiet warning, revealing his irritation.

Shit. 'Maury was sick,' I whispered. That is all I can do to make it happen. 'Nice speech you made, Mr. Maury.' 'Thank you, sir. I understand that you are an avid fisher.' Ray raises his eyebrows and smiles - a rare, genuine, genuine smile from Ray Black - and off we go, speaking of fish. I suddenly feel surplus to needs. He charmed my father's pants... as he did you, my subconscious cracks me. Its power knows no bounds. I apologize for going to find Maury. She talks to her parents, who are always so charming and who greet me warmly. We exchange brief jokes, mostly about their upcoming Barbados vacation and our move. 'Maury, how could you put me on Ray?' I whistle at the first opportunity, we will not be heard. 'Because I knew you never would, and I want to help with Grayson's engagement issues.'

Maury smiles sweetly at me. I frown. I am the one who will not engage with him, idiot! 'He looks very cool about it, Naddalin. Do not worry. Look at him now - Grayson cannot take his eyes off you.' I look up and Ray and Grayson look at me. 'He looked at you like a hawk.' 'I'd better go save Ray or Grayson.' I do not know which ones. You did not hear the last time, Mary Smith! I stare at her. 'Naddalin, I've done you a favor,' she calls me. 'Hi.' I smile at them on my return. They look good. Grayson enjoys a private joke, and my dad looks incredibly relaxed considering he is in a social situation. What did they discuss besides the 'Naddalin, where's the toilet?' 'Back off in front of the marquee and to the left.' 'See you soon. You kids have fun.' Ray exits. I look nervously at Grayson. We stop briefly as a photographer takes a photo of the two of us. 'Thanks, Mr. Maury. The photographer leaves. I blink from the flash.

'So you charmed my father too?' 'As well as?' Grayson's gray eyes burn and he raises a questioning eyebrow. I rinse. He raises his hand and traces my cheek with his fingers. 'Oh, I wish I knew what you were thinking, Naddalin,' he whispered darkly, cupping my chin, and lifting our heads so that we were looking intently in each other's eyes. My breathing is blocked. How can he have that effect on me, even in this crowded tent? 'Right now, I think, pretty tie,' I breathe. He is laughing. 'It recently became my favorite.' I blush scarlet. 'You look lovely, Naddalin, that halter dress looks good on you, and I can stroke your back, feel your beautiful skin.' Suddenly, it is like we are alone in the room. Just the two of us, my whole body came alive, each nerve ending singing softly, this electricity pulling me towards it, charging between us.

'You know it's gonna be good, don't you, baby?' he whispers. I close my eyes as my insides unwind and melt. 'But I want more,' I whisper. 'After?' he looks at me puzzled, his eyes darkening. I nod and swallow. Now he knows. 'More,' he repeats softly. Test the Word - a simple little word, but full of promise. His thumb traces my lower lip. 'You want hearts and flowers.' I nod my head again. He blinks at me, and I watch his internal struggle play in his eyes. 'Naddalin. Her voice is soft. 'It's not something that I know.' 'Me neither.' He smiles slightly. 'You don't know much,' he whispers. 'You know all the wrong things.' 'Wrong, not for me.' He shakes his head. He looks so sincere. 'Try it,' he whispers. A challenge that challenges me and he tilts his head to the side and smiles his twisted, dazzling smile. I am gasping, and I am Eve in the Garden of Eden, and it is the serpent, and I cannot resist. 'Alright,' I whisper. 'What?' I have his undivided attention. I swallow. 'OK, I will try.' 'You agree?' His disbelief is evident. 'Subject to soft limits, yes. I will try.'

My voice is so small. Grayson closes his eyes and hugs me. 'Jesus, Naddalinh, you are so unexpected. You take my breath away. He steps back, and suddenly Ray comes back, and the volume of the marquee gradually goes up and fills my ears. We are not alone. Holy shit, I just agreed to be his sub. Grayson smiles at Ray and his eyes dance with joy. 'girly, should we have lunch?' 'Okay.' I blink at Ray, trying to find my balance. What have you done? My subconscious screams at me. My inner goddess does back flips in a routine worthy of a Russian Olympic gymnast. 'Would you like to join us, Grayson?' Ray asks. Grayson! I stare at him, imploring him to refuse. I need space to think... What have I done? 'Thanks, Mr. Black, but I have plans. It was great to meet you, sir. 'Likewise,' Ray replies. 'Take care of my little girl.'

'Oh, I have every intention of doing it, Mr. Black.' They shake hands. I feel sick. Ray has no idea how Grayson intends to deal with me. Grayson takes my hand and brings it to his lips and tenderly kisses my knuckles, his burning eyes fixed on mine. 'Later, Miss Black,' he breathes, his voice full of promise. My stomach curls up at the thought... oh Dear. Wait... later? Ray takes my elbow and leads me to the entrance of the tent. 'Sounds like a tough young man. Well-off too. You could do a lot worse, girly. But why did I have to hear about him from Maury,' he snarls.

I shrug my shoulders to apologize. 'Well, any man who loves and knows his fly fishing agrees with me.' Sacred Cow - Ray approves. If only he knew. Ray takes me home at dusk. 'Call your mom,' he said. 'I will. Thanks for coming, dad.' 'I would not have missed it for the world, girly. You make me so proud.' Oh no. I am not going to get emotional. A huge lump forms in my throat and I hug him tight. He puts his arms

around me, puzzled, and I cannot help myself - tears are rolling in my eyes. 'Hey, girly, honey,' Ray croons. 'Big old day... eh would you like me to come make you some tea?' I laugh, despite my tears. Tea is always the answer according to Ray. I remember my mom complaining about him, saying that when it came to tea and sympathy he was always good at tea, not so keen on sympathy. 'No, dad, I am fine. It has been so great seeing you. I will be back very soon once I get settled in New York.'

'Good luck with the interviews. Tell me how they are going.' 'Of course, dad.' 'I love you, girly.' 'I love you too, daddy.' He smiles, his warm brown eyes shining, and he gets back into his car. I wave for him to leave as he heads into the twilight, and I walk quietly into the apartment. The first thing I do is check my cell phone. It needs to be recharged, so I must find the charger and plug it in before I can retrieve my messages. Four missed calls, one voice message, and two SMS. Three missed calls from Grayson... no messages. A missed call from Sam and a voicemail from him wishing me the best for graduation. I open the texts.

~ Are you safe at home ~

~ Call me ~

They are both from Grayson, why hasn't he called home? I walk to my room and turn on the nasty machine. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Tonight Date: May 25, 2009, 11:58 PM To Naddalin Black Hope you got home in your car. Let me know if you are okay. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Jeez... why is he so worried about my Beetle. It has given me three years of loyal service, and Sam has always been there to keep it going for me. Grayson's next email is today. From: Grayson Murray Subject:

Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 5:22 PM To Naddalin Black What can I say that I have not already? Happy to talk about Pittsburgh time. You were beautiful today. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I want to see it. I hit the answer

From: Naddalin Black Subject: Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 7:23 PM To Grayson Murray I can come over tonight to chat if you like. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Soft Limits Date: May 26, 2009, 7:27 PM To Naddalin Black I will come to you. I meant it when I said I was not happy you were driving this car. I will be with you shortly. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Holy shit... he is coming now. I must prepare one thing for him: the first edition of Thomas Hardy's

books is still on the shelves in the living room. I cannot keep them. I wrap them in brown paper and scribble on the wrapper a direct quote from Tess from the book:

'Hi.' I feel unbearably shy when I open the door. Grayson is standing on the porch in his jeans and leather jacket.

'Hi,' he says, and his face lights up with his beaming smile. I take a moment to admire the pretty. Oh my gosh, it is hot in leather.

'Come in.'

'If I can,' he said amused. He raises a bottle of champagne as he enters. 'I thought we were going to celebrate your graduation. Nothing beats a good Bollinger.'

'Interesting choice of words,' I comment dryly.

He smiles.

'Oh, I like your mind ready, Naddalin.'

'We only have tea cups. We have packed all the glasses.'

'Teacups look good to me.'

I head for the kitchen. Nervous, butterflies flooding my stomach, it is like having an unpredictable, predatory panther or mountain lion in my living room.

'Do you want saucers too?'

'The teacups will be fine, Naddalin,' Grayson calls absently from the living room.

When I come back, he looks at the brown bundle of books. I place the cups on the table.

'It's for you,' I whisper anxiously.

Damn... it is going to be a fight.

'Hmm, I thought so. Very apt quote.' His long index finger absently traces the writing. 'I thought I was D'Urberville, not Angel. You decided to debase him.' He gives me a brief wolf smile. 'Trust yourself to find something that resonates so well.'

'It's also a plea,' I whisper. Why am I so nervous? My mouth is dry.

'A plea for me to go easy with me?'

I agree.

'I bought them for you,' he said softly, his gaze unmoved. 'I will go with you more easily if you accept them.'

I swallow convulsively.

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'Grayson, I can't accept them, they're just too many.'

'See, that is what I was talking about, you challenge me. I want you to have them, and that is the end of the discussion. It is amazingly simple. You do not have to think about that.'

As a submissive, you would just be grateful to them. You just accept what I buy from you because I like it for you to do it.'

'I wasn't submissive when you bought them for me,' I whisper.

'No... but you accepted, Naddalin.' His eyes were wary.

I sigh. I am not going to win this, so on to Plan B.

'So? they are mine to do with what I want 'them eyes, he is suspicious of me, but concedes.

'Yes.'

'In that case, I would like to donate them to a charity, which works in Darfur, because it is important to you. They can auction them off.'

'If that's what you want to do.' Her mouth takes a hard line. He is disappointed.

I am blushing.

'I'll think about it,' I whisper, I do not want to disappoint him, and his words come back to me. I want you to want to please me.

'Don't think so, Naddalin. Not about that.' Her tone is calm and serious.

How not to think? You can pretend to be a car, like its other possessions, my subconscious makes an unwanted vitriolic return. I do not know. Oh, can't we go back? The atmosphere between us is now tense. I do not know what to do. I look at my fingers.

How to recover from this situation?

He puts the bottle of champagne on the table and stands in front of me. Putting his hand under my chin, he tilts my head up. He looks at me, his expression was serious.

'I will buy you a lot of things, Naddalin. Get used to it. I can afford it. I am an extraordinarily rich man. He leans in and plants a quick, chaste kiss on my lips. 'Please.' He frees me.

'Ho' my subconscious mouth looks at me.

'It makes me feel cheap,' I whisper.

Grayson runs his hand through his hair, exasperated.

'It should not. You think about it too much, Naddalin. Do not make a vague moral judgment based on what others might think. Do not waste your energy. It is only because you have reservations about our arrangement, it is perfectly natural. You do not know what you are getting yourself into.'

I frown, trying to understand his words.

'Hey, stop that,' he orders softly, cupping the chin again and pulling on it gently so that I free my lower lip from my teeth. 'There's nothing about you that's cheap, Naddalin.'

I will not make you think of that. I just bought you some old books that I thought might mean something to you, that is all. Have some champagne. Her eyes warm and soften, and I smile shyly at her. 'It's better,' he whispers. He picks up the champagne, removes the top and the aluminum cage, twists the bottle rather than

the cork, and opens it with a little pop and a practiced flourish that does not spill a drop. He half-filled the cups.

'It's pink,' I whisper, surprised.

'Bollinger Grande Annee Rose 1999, an excellent vintage,' he says with delight.

'In tea cups.'

He smiles.

'In teacups. Congratulations on your graduation, Naddalin.' We clink goblets and he takes a drink, but I cannot help but think that this is my surrender.

'Thanks,' I whisper and take a sip. Of course, it is delicious. 'Are we going to cross the soft lines?'

He smiles and I blush.

'Always so impatient.' Grayson takes my hand and leads me to the couch where he is sitting and pulls me next to him.

'You are a stepfather, a very taciturn man.'

Oh... no soft limits then. I just want to eliminate this; anxiety gnaws at me.

'You get that fact of having it eat out of hand. I pout.'

Grayson laughed softly.

'Only because I can fish.'

'How do you know he liked to fish?'

'You told me. When we went for coffee.'

'Oh... did I do it?' I take another sip. Wow, he has a memory for the details. Hmm... this champagne is particularly good. 'Have you tried the wine at the reception?'

Grayson grimaces.

'Yes. It was horrible.'

'I thought of you when I tasted it. How could you have been so knowledgeable about wine?'

'I don't know, Naddalin, I just know what I like.' His gray eyes glow, almost silver, and it makes me blush. 'A bit more?' he asks, referring to the champagne.

'Please.'

Grayson stands up Billie fully and retrieves the bottle. He fills my cup. Does he make me drunk, I looked at him suspiciously.

'This place looks pretty sparse, are you ready to move?'

'More or less.'

'Are you working tomorrow?'

'Yes, my last day at Eastwood's'

'I'll help you move, but I promised to meet my sister at the airport.'

Oh... this is news.

'Mia arrives from Paris exceedingly early Saturday morning. I am heading back to New York tomorrow, but I hear Jack giving you a hand.'

'Yeah, Maury is very excited about it.'

Grayson frowns.

'Yeah, Maury and Jack, who would have thought?' he whispers, and for some reason, he does not look happy.

'So what are you doing for your job in New York?'

When are we going to talk about limits? What is his game?

'I have a few interviews for internships.'

'When were you going to tell me that?' He arched an eyebrow.

'Uh... I am telling you now.'

He narrows his eyes.

'Or?'

For some reason, maybe because he could use his influence, I do not want to tell him.

'A few publishing houses.'

'Is that what you wanna do, something in the edit?'

I nod suspiciously.

'Good?' He looks at me patiently, wanting more information.

'Well what?'

'Don't be obtuse, Naddalin, which publishing houses?' He growls.

'Just little ones,' I whisper.

'Why don't you want me to know?'

'Undue influence.'

He frowns.

'Oh, now you're obtuse.'

He is laughing.

'Obtuse Me God, you challenge. Drink, let us talk about these limits.' He is fishing for another copy of my email and the list. Does he walk around with these lists in his pockets? There is one in his jacket that I have. Damn, I would better not forget that. I empty my cup.

He looks at me quickly.

'After?'

'Please.'

He smiles his blissful and intimate smile, holds the bottle of champagne, and stops.

'Did you eat any?'

Oh no... not that old chestnut.

'Yes. I had a three course meal with Ray.' I roll my eyes at him. Champagne makes me daring.

He leans forward and holds my chin, staring me in the eye.

'The next time you roll your eyes at me, I'll take you on my knee.'

What?

'Oh,' I breathe and I can see the excitement in his eyes.

'Oh,' he replies, mirroring my tone. 'So it starts, Naddalin.

My heart slams against my chest and butterflies escape from my stomach into my tight throat. Why is it hot?

He fills my cup and I drink everything. Chastised, I look at him.

'You have your attention now, don't you?'

I agree.

'Answer me.'

'Yes... you have my attention.'

'Good,' he smirked knowingly. 'So sex acts. We did most of that.'

I walk over to him on the couch and look at the list.

APPENDIX

- Soft limits
- To be discussed and agreed between the two parties:
- Which of the following sexual acts are acceptable to the Bidder?
- Masturbation
- Blowjob
- Cunnilingus
- Investigate in touching

- vaginal squirting sex
- Anal reaming
- Anal/Butt
- Blowing cum all over your body and you mine

'No fisting, you say. Is there anything else you object to?' He asks softly.

I swallow and roll it around some before in my mouth.

'Butt sex doesn't exactly float my boat.'

'I will accept the fisting, but I would like to claim your ass, Naddalin.' But we will wait for that. Plus, it is not something we can dive into, 'he smiles at me. 'Your ass will need training.'

'Training?' I whisper.

'Oh yes. It will take careful preparation.anal sex can be very pleasurable, trust me. But if we try and you do not like it, we do not have to do it again.' He smiles at me. I blinked at him. He thinks I am going to enjoy it. How does he know it is nice?

'Did you do this?' I whisper.

'Yes.'

Holy shit. I gasp.

'With a man?'

'No. I have never slept with a man. Not my scene.'

'Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?'

'Yes.'

Holy shit... how I frown. It moves to the bottom of the list.

'Okay... swallow sperm. Well you get an A in there.'

I blush, and my inner goddess smacks her lips together with pride.

'Therefore.' He looks at me smiling. 'Swallow semen, okay?'

I nod, unable to look him in the eye, and drain my cup again.

'After?' He asks.

'After.' And I suddenly remember our conversation earlier in the day as he refilled my cup. Is he referring to that or just champagne?

'Sex toys? He asks.

I shrug my shoulders, going through the list.

Is the use of sex toys acceptable for the submissive?

- Vibrators
- Dildos
- Butt Plugs
- Other

'anal plug doing what it says on the box?' I crinkle my nose in disgust.

'Yes,' he smiles. 'And I am referring to anal sex above. Training.'

'Oh... what's in another one?'

'Pearls, eggs... that kind of stuff.'

'Eggs?' I am alarmed.

'No real eggs,' he laughed loudly, shaking his head.

I tighten her lips.

'I'm glad you find me funny.' I cannot keep my hurt feelings out of my voice.

He stops laughing.

'I am sorry. Miss Black, I am sorry,' he said, trying to sound contrite, but his eyes still dance with humor. 'A problem with the toys?'

'No,' I say dryly.

'Naddalin,' he coaxes. 'I am sorry. Believe me. I do not mean to laugh. I have never had this conversation in such detail. You are so inexperienced. I am sorry.' His eyes are large, gray, and sincere.

I thaw a bit and take another sip of champagne.

'Right - bondage,' he said, returning to the list. I examine the list and my inner goddess bounces up and down like a little child was handcuffs/metal.

- Is bondage acceptable to the submissive?
- Hands in front Hands behind back
- Ankles Knees
- Elbows
- Ankle cuff
- Spreader bars
- Attached to furniture
- Bandage
- Sex swing
- gagging eyes
- Bondage with rope
- Bondage with tape
- Pole dancing
- Bondage with leather cuffs
- Suspension
- Bondage with handcuffs/metal ties
- Fuck machine.

'We talked about the suspension. And that is fine if you want to define that as a hard limit. It takes a long time, and I only have you for short periods anyway. Pittsburgh? ' Don't laugh at me, but what is a spreader bar? ' I promise not to laugh. I apologized twice.' He looks at me. 'Don't force me to start over,' he warns. And I am visibly shrinking... oh, he is so bossy. 'A retractor is a bar with cuffs for the ankles and/or wrists. They are fun.' 'Okay... and gag me well. I would be afraid I could not breathe.'

'I would be worried if you could not breathe. I do not want to suffocate you.

'And how can I use safe words if I am gagged?'

He pauses.

'First, I hope you never have to use them. But if you are gagged we will use hand signals,' he said simply.

I blinked at him. But if I am tied up, how will it work? My brain is starting to fog up... hmm alcohol.

'I'm nervous about the gagging.'

'Okay. I will take note.'

I look at him, the realization is emerging.

'Do you like to tie up your submissives so they can't touch you?'

He looks at me, his eyes wide.

'That's one of the reasons,' he said calmly.

'Is that why you tied my hands?'

'Yes.'

'You don't like to talk about it,' I whisper.

'No, I do not. Would you like another drink? It makes you brave, and I need to know how you feel about the pain.'

Holy shit... This is the tricky part. He refills my cup of tea and I sip.

'So, what's your general attitude to pain?' Grayson looks at me impatiently

'You bite your lip,' he said darkly.

I stop immediately, but I do not know what to say. I blush and look at my hands.

'Were you physically punished as a child?'

'No.'

'So you have no sphere of reference?'

'No.'

'It is not as bad as you might think. Your imagination is your worst enemy in all of this,' he whispers.

'You must do it?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Go with the land, Naddalin. That is what I do. I can see you are nervous. Let us review the methods.'

He shows me the list. My subconscious runs, screams, and hides behind the sofa.

- Spanking
- Paddle
- Whipping
- Caning
- Biting
- Nipple clamps
- Genital clamps
- Genital Piercings
- Ice cream
- Hot wax
- Other types/methods of pain
- Live cam shows

'Well, you said no to genital clamps. Particularly good. What hurts me from the blows of the stick the most.'

I bleach.

'We can work on it.'

'Or don't at all,' I whisper.

'It is part of the deal, baby, but we will work on this. Naddalin, I am not going to push you too far.'

'This punishment thing worries me the most.' My voice is exceedingly small.

'Well, I am glad you told me. We will keep crossing the list for now. And as you get more comfortable with this stuff, we will turn up the intensity. We are going to go for it. slowly.'

I swallow, and he leans forward and kisses me on my lips.

'There was not that bad, was it?

I shrug my heart in my mouth again.

'Look, I want to talk about one more thing, so I'll take you to bed.'

'Bed?' I blink quickly and my blood beats around my body, warming places I did not know existed until very recently.

'Come on, Naddalin, speaking of all this, I want to fuck you next week now. It must influence you too.'

I squirm. My inner goddess is panting.

'See Beside, there is something I want to try.'

'Something painful?'

'No - stop seeing pain everywhere.' It is mostly fun. Have I ever hurt you?

I rinse.

'No.'

'Well. Look, earlier today you were talking about wanting more,' he stops, suddenly uncertain.

Oh my... where is it going?

He shakes my hand.

'Outside of the time you're my sub, maybe we can try.' I do not know if it will work.

I do not know how to separate it all. It may not work. But I am ready to try. One night a week. I do not know.'

Holy cow... my mouth opens, my subconscious is in shock, Grayson Maury is ready for more! He is ready to try! My subconscious burst out from behind the couch, still registering a shock on his harpy face.

'I have a condition.' He looks suspiciously at my stunned expression.

'What?' I breathe. Whatever. I will give you anything.

'You graciously accept my graduation gift.'

'Oh.' And deep down I know what it is. Fright arises in my stomach.

He stares at me, gauging my reaction.

'Come on,' he whispers and stands up, dragging me up. Takes off his jacket, drapes it over my shoulders, and heads for the door.

A red hatchback is parked outside, a two-door compact Audi.

'It is for you. Happy graduation,' he whispered as he pulled me into his arms and kissed my hair.

He bought me a goddamn car, brand new in appearance. Damn... I have had enough trouble with the books. I look at him blankly, desperately trying to figure out how I feel about it. I am appalled on one level, grateful on another, shocked that he did, but the dominant emotion is anger. Yeah, I am angry, especially after everything I have told him about the books... but he had already bought this. Taking my hand, he leads me on the path of this new acquisition.

'Naddalin, your Beetle is old and downright dangerous. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you when it is so easy for me to do things right,' he pauses. His eyes are on me, but right now I cannot bring myself to look at him. I stand silently looking at her formidable bright red novelty.

'I told your father-in-law about it. He totally agreed,' he whispers.

Turning around, I stare at him, my mouth open in horror.

'You told Ray about it. How could you? I can barely spit out the words. How dare he, Poor Ray. I feel bad, mortified for my father.'

'It is a gift, Naddalin. Can't you just say thank you?'

'But you know it's too much.'

'Not for me it's not, not for my peace of mind.'

I frown, not knowing what to say. He just does not understand! He has had money his whole life.

Okay, not his whole life - not as a little kid - and my worldview changes. The thought is very disappointing, and I soften towards the car, feeling guilty about my spike. His intentions are good, misguided, but not from a bad place.

'Glad you loaned me this, like the laptop.'

He sighs deeply.

'Okay. On loan. Indefinitely.' He looks at me suspiciously.

'No, not indefinitely, but for now. Thank you.'

He frowns. I reach out and kiss her briefly on her cheek.

'Thanks for the car, sir.' I say as nicely as I can, I do.

He suddenly grabs me and pulls me against him, one hand on my back holding me against him and the other fisting through my hair.

'You are a stimulating woman, Naddalin Black.' He kisses me passionately, forcing my lips to part with his tongue, taking no prisoners.

My blood heats up immediately and I return his kiss to him with my passion. I want it badly - despite the car, the books, the soft limits... the caning... I want it.

'It takes all my self-control not to fuck you on the hood of that car right now, just to show you that you are mine, and if I want to buy you a fucking car, I will buy you a fucking car,' he growls. 'Now we're going to get you inside and naked.' He plants me a quick, brutal kiss.

Boy, he is angry. He grabs my hand and leads me back to the apartment and straight to my room... no way through. My subconscious is behind the sofa again, my head hidden under its hands. He turns on the nightlight and stops staring at me.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

His gaze is impassive; her cold gray eyes shards of smoked glass.

'I'm sorry about the car and the books,' I stop. He remains silent and dark.

'You scare me when you're angry,' I breathe, staring at him.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he opens them, his expression softens slightly. He takes a deep breath and swallows.

'Turn around,' he whispers. 'I want to get you out of this dress.'

Another mercurial mood jump that is so hard to keep up with. Obediently, I turn, and my heartbeats, desire instantly replacing uneasiness, streaming through my blood, and settling in darkness and desire low, low in my stomach. He picks up my hair from my back so that it hangs over my right side, curling over my chest. He places his index finger on the nape of my neck and slowly slides it down my spine. Her well-groomed nail gently brushes my back.

'I love this dress,' he whispers. 'I love to see your flawless skin.'

His finger reaches the back of my halter dress in the middle of my spine, and hooking his finger under the top, he pulls me closer so that I step back against him. I feel it flush against my body. Bending down, he inhales my hair.

'You smell so good, Naddalin. So sweet.' His nose brushes my ear along my neck, and he trails soft, light kisses down my shoulder.

My breathing changes, becoming shallow, rushed, full of expectation. His fingers are on my zipper. Painfully slowly, once again, he relieves him as his lips move, licking, kissing, and sucking on my other shoulder. He is so good at it. My body resonates and I begin to squirm languidly under his touch.

'You. Go. Go. Have. To. Learn. To. Keep. Stay.' He whispers, kissing me around the back of my neck between each word.

He pulls on the tie at the halter neck, and the dress falls and puffs up at my feet.

'No bra, Miss Black. I like it.'

Her hands reach around and wrap around my breasts, and my nipples curl up against her.

'Lift your arms and put them around my head,' he whispers against my neck.

I obey immediately, and my breasts lift and push in his hands, my nipples hardening further. My fingers dig into her hair, and very gently I pull her soft, sexy hair. I roll my head to one side to give it easier access to my neck.

'Mmm...' he whispers into that space behind my ear, as he begins to extend my nipples with his long fingers, reflecting my hands in his hair.

I moan as the sensation registers crisp and clear in my groin.

'Shall I bring you over here?' He whispers.

I arch my back to force my breasts into his expert hands.

'You like it, don't you, Miss Black?'

'Mmm...'

'Tell me.' He continues the slow sensual torture, pulling gently.

'Yes.'

'Yes what.'

'Yes sir.'

'Good girl.' He squeezes me hard and my body twists convulsively against his forehead.

I gasp at the exquisite, shrill, pleasure/pain. I feel it against me. I moan and my hands tighten in her hair pulling harder.

'I don't think you're ready to come yet,' he whispers, stealing his hands, and he gently bites my earlobe and pulls it. 'Besides, I did not like you.'

Oh... no, what does that mean? My brain registers through the haze of needy desire as I moan.

'So maybe- I won't let you come after all.' He returns the attention of his fingers to my nipples, pulling, twisting, kneading. I grind my behind against him... moving from side to side.

I feel his smile against my neck as his hands move down to my hips. His fingers hook into my panties at the back, stretching them out, and he pushes his thumbs through the fabric, shredding them and throwing them in front of me so I can see... holy shit. His hands descend to my cock... and from behind, he slowly inserts his finger.

'Oh, yes. My sweet girl is all set,' he hisses, spinning me around to face him. His breathing quickened. He puts his finger in his mouth. 'You taste so good, Miss Black.' He sighs. 'Undress me,' he orders softly, looking at me, hooded eyes.

All I wear are my shoes, well, Maury's high heels. I am taken aback. I have never undressed a man.

'You can do it,' he coaxes softly.

Oh my. I blink quickly. Where to start I pick up his shirt, he grabs my hands and shakes his head, smiling slyly at me.

'Oh no.' He shakes his head, smiling. 'Not the t-shirt, you may have to touch me for what I planned.' Her eyes are filled with excitement.

Oh... this is news... I can touch clothes. He takes one of my hands and places it against his erection.

'This is the effect you have on me, Miss Black.'

I gasp and curl my fingers around his circumference, and he smiles.

'I want to be inside of you. Take off my jeans. You are in charge.'

Holy shit... I in charge. My mouth opens.

'What are you going to do with me?' He teases.

Oh the possibilities... my inner goddess roars, and from somewhere born of Black's frustration, need, and sheer bravery, I push him onto the bed. He laughs as he falls and I watch him feeling victorious. My inner goddess is going to explode. I tear off her shoes, quickly, awkwardly, and her socks. He looks at me, his eyes bright with amusement and desire. He looks... glorious... mine. I climb onto the bed and sit astride him to undo his jeans, sliding my fingers under the belt, feeling the hair in his happy trail. He closes his eyes and flexes his hips.

'You're going to have to learn to be still,' I snarled and pulled the hair under his belt.

His breathing stops and he smiles at me.

'Yes, Miss Black,' he whispers, his eyes shining. 'In my pocket, condom,' he breathes.

I slowly dig into his pocket, looking at his face as I feel him around me. His mouth is open. I fish the two packages of foil that I find and lay them on the bed near her hips. Of them! My impatient fingers reach the button of his belt and undo it, groping a little. I am beyond excited.

'So impatient, Miss Black,' he whispered, his voice humorous. I pull the zipper, and now I am faced with the problem of taking off his pants... hmm. I drag myself and pull. They barely move. I frown. How can it be so difficult?

'I can't stand still if you're going to bite that lip,' he warns, then arches his pelvis off the bed so I can pull up his pants and boxers at the same time, whoa... the release. He throws his clothes to the ground.

Saint Moses, he is all mine to play with, and suddenly it is Christmas.

'Now what are you going to do?' he breathes, all traces of humor gone. I reach out and touch him, looking at his expression as I do. His mouth is shaped like a letter O as he takes a deep breath. Her skin is so smooth and soft... and hard... hmm, what a delicious combination. I lean forward, my hair falls around me and it is in my mouth. I suck, hard. He closes his eyes, his hips shaking under me.

'Damn it, Naddalin, shut up,' he moaned.

I feel so powerful, it is such an exhilarating feeling, teasing him and testing him with my mouth and tongue. He tenses under me as I run my mouth up and down, pushing him down my throat, my lips tight... over and over.

'Stop, Naddalin, stop. I do not want to come.'

I sit up, blinking at him, and panting like him, but confused. I thought I was in charge. My inner goddess looks like someone who snatched her ice cream from her.

'Your innocence and your enthusiasm are very disarming,' he gasped. 'You, besides... that's what we have to do.'

Oh.

'Here, put this on.' He hands me an aluminum bag.

Holy Crap. How I tear up the package and the rubber condom is sticky in my fingers.

'Pinch the top then roll it up. You do not want any air at the end of that sucker,'

He gasps.

...And very slowly, concentrating hard, I do as I am told.

'Damn, you're killing me here, Naddalin,' he moaned.

I admire my work and him. He is a beautiful specimen of a man, looking at him is overly exciting.

'Now. I want to be buried in you,' he whispers. I look at him, intimidated, and he suddenly sits up, so we are face to face.

'Like that,' he breathes, and he winds one hand around my hips, lifting me slightly, and with the other, he positions himself under me, and very slowly, relieves me towards him.

I moaned as he opened me, filling me, his mouth open in surprise at the feeling soft, sublime, scary, and too full. Oh please.

'That's right, baby, feel me, all of me,' he growls and briefly closes his eyes.

-And-

He is inside of me, sheathed to the hilt, and he holds me in place, for seconds... minutes... I have no idea, staring intently in my eyes.

'It's deep like that,' he whispers. He flexes and swings his hips in the same motion, and I moan... oh my - the sensation radiates in my stomach... all over. Shit!

'Again,' I whisper. He smiles a lazy smile and obliges.

Moaning, I throw my head back, my hair falls down my back, and very slowly it falls back on the bed.

'You move, Naddalin, up and down, however you like. Take my hands,' he breathes, his voice hoarse and low and so sexy.

I shake his hands for life. Slowly I push it and come back down, oh my God. Her eyes burn with mad expectation. His breathing is irregular, matching mine, and he lifts his pelvis as I descend, bouncing me. We take the beat... up, down, up, down... repeatedly... and it is so... good. Between my gasping breaths, the deep and overflowing fullness... the vehement feeling that pulsates in me that builds quickly, I look at him, my eyes riveted... and I see the wonder there, marveling at me.

I fuck him. I am in charge. He is mine and I am his. The thought pushes me, weighted with concrete, overboard, and I cum around him... screaming incoherently.

He grabs my hips, and closes his eyes, tilts his head back, jaw straight, he comes quietly. I collapse onto his chest, overwhelmed, somewhere between fantasy and reality, a place where there are no hard or soft boundaries.

Slowly the outside world invades my senses, and oh my God, what an invasion. I float, my limbs were soft and languid, completely exhausted. I am lying on top of him, my head on his chest, and he smells divine: fresh, washed laundry and expensive body wash, and the best, most seductive scent on the planet... Grayson. I do not want to move, I want to breathe this elixir for eternity. I snuggled up to him, wishing I did not have the barrier of his t-shirt. And as rhyme and sanity return to the rest of my body, I extend my hand across her chest. This is the first time I touch it here. He is firm... strong. His hand rises and grabs mine, but he softens the blow by pulling it towards his mouth and gently kissing my knuckles.

He turns around so he looks at me.

'No,' he whispers, then kisses me lightly.

'Why don't you like to be touched?' I whisper, looking into soft gray eyes.

'Because, I have numerous Shadows of shit, Naddalin.'

Oh... his honesty is completely disarming. I blinked at him.

'I had an exceedingly difficult introduction to life. I do not want to burden you with details.'

Do not. 'He strokes his nose against mine, then pulls away from me and sits up.

'Those are all bases covered. How was that?'

He looks completely satisfied with himself and seems very down to earth at the same time like he is just ticked another box on a checklist. I am still in shock at the difficult introduction to the Life Commentary. It is so frustrating - I desperately need to know more. But he will not tell me. I tilt my head to the side, like him, and make a huge effort to smile at him.

'If you imagine for a minute that I think you've handed over control to me, well you didn't take my GPA into account.' I smile shyly at him. 'But thank you for the illusion.'

'Miss Black, you are not just a pretty face. You have had six orgasms so far and they are all mine,' he brags, cheerfully again.

I blushed and blinked at the same time, as he looked at me. He counts! His brow furrows.

'Do you have something to tell me? his voice is suddenly harsh.

I frown. Shit.

'I had a dream this morning.'

'Oh?' He looks at me.

Double shit. Am I in trouble?

'I came in my sleep.' I throw my arm over my eyes. He does not say anything. I look at him under my arm and he looks amused.

'In your sleep?'

'Woke me up.'

'I am sure. What were you dreaming about?'

Shit.

'You.'

'What was I doing?'

I throw my arm over my eyes again. And like a little child, I briefly entertain the idea that if I cannot see him, then he cannot see me.

'Naddalin, what was I doing, I won't ask you again.'

'You had a riding crop.'

He moves my arm.

'Really?'

'Yes.' I am crimson.

'There is still hope for you,' he whispers. 'I have several whips.'

'Brown braided leather?'

He is laughing.

'No, but I'm sure I could have one.' Her gray eyes shine with excitement.

Leaning in, he kisses me briefly then gets up and grabs his boxers, oh no... he leaves. I take a glance at the time - it is only nine-forty. I also get out of bed and grab my sweatpants and a tank top, then sit on the bed, my legs crossed, staring at him. I do not want him to leave. What can I do?

'When is your period due?' He interrupts my thoughts.

What!

'I hate wearing these clothes,' he growls. He lifts the condom, then puts it on the floor, and puts on his jeans.

'Good?' he invites me in when I do not answer, and he looks at me expectantly as if he is waiting for my opinion on the weather. Holy shit... These are personal things.

'Next week.' I look at my hands.

'You have to settle for a little contraception.'

He is so bossy. I look at him blankly. He sits on the bed, putting on his shoes and socks.

'Do you have a doctor?

I shake my head. We are back to mergers and acquisitions - another 180-degree change in mood.

He frowns.

'I can ask mine to come to see you at your apartment - Sunday morning before you come to see me. Or he can see you at my house. Which do you prefer?

No pressure then. Something else he is paying for... but it is for his benefit.

'Your place.' This means that I am guaranteed to see him on Sunday.

'Okay. I will let you know the time.'

'You go?'

Do not go... stay with me, please.

'Yes.'

Why?

'How are you going to come back?' I whisper.

'Stephen will come get me.'

'I can drive you. I have a nice new car.'

He looks at me, his expression warm.

'It is more like that. But you drank too much.'

'Did you make me drunk on purpose?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because you think too much about everything, and you are reluctant like your stepfather. A drop of wine in you and you start talking, and I need you to communicate honestly with me. Otherwise you slap, and I have no idea what you are thinking. In vino veritas, Naddalin.'

'And do you think you're always honest with me?'

'I strive to be.' He looks at me suspiciously. 'It will only work if we are honest with each other.'

'I would like you to stay and use this.' I lift the second condom.

He smiles and his eyes sparkle with humor.

'Naddalin, I have crossed so many lines here tonight. I must go. I will see you on Sunday. I will have the revised contract ready for you, and then we can really start playing.'

'To play?' Holy shit. My heart leaps in my mouth.

'I would like to do a scene with you. But I will not do it until you sign, so I know you are ready.'

'Oh. So I could stretch this out if I do not sign?'

He looks at me evaluating, then his lips twist into a smile.

'Well, I guess you could, but I can crack under the tension.'

'CrackHow?' My inner goddess has awakened and is paying attention.

He slowly nods, then smiles, teasingly.

'It could get ugly.

Her smile is contagious.

'Ugly, how?'

'Oh you know, explosions, car chases, kidnapping, incarceration.'

'Would you kidnap me?'

'Oh yeah,' he smirked.

'Hold me against my will?' Jeez, it is hot.

'Oh yeah,' he nods. 'And then we are talking TPE 24/7.'

'You lost me,' I breathe, my heart beats... is it serious?

'Total Power Exchange - 24 hours a day.' Her eyes are shining and I can feel her excitement from where I am sitting.

Holy shit.

'So, you have no choice,' he said Naddalindonically.

'Clearly.' I cannot help the Naddalincasm in my voice as my eyes turn to the sky.

'Oh, Naddalin Black, did you just roll your eyes at me?'

Shit!

'No,' I squeak.

'You did. What did I say I would do to you if you roll your eyes at me again?'

Shit... He sits on the edge of the bed.

'Come here,' he said softly.

I bleach. Damn... he is serious. I sit down to watch him completely still.

'I didn't sign,' I whisper.

'I told you what I would do. I am a man of my word. I am going to spank you, then I am going to fuck you fast and hard. Looks like we will need that condom.'

Her voice is so soft, menacing and she is damn hot. My insides practically twist with a powerful, needy, liquid desire. He looks at me, waiting, his eyes blazing. Temporarily, I unfold my legs. Should I run? That is it, our relationship is at stake, right here, right now. Do I let him or do I say no, and so that is it? Because I know it will be over if I say no. Do it! My inner goddess is begging me, my subconscious is as paralyzed as me. 'I am waiting,' he said. 'I am not a patient man.'

Oh for the love of all that is holy. I am panting, scared, excited. Blood hammers my body, my legs are like jelly. Slowly, I crawl towards him until I am next to him.

'Good girl,' he whispers. 'Now get up.'

Oh shit... cannot he just be done with I do not know if I can handle it. Hesitantly, I climb to my feet. He reaches out and I place the condom in his palm. Suddenly he grabs me, causing me to fall onto his knees. With a fluid movement, he tilts his body so that my chest rests on the bed next to him. He throws his right leg over mine and places his left forearm on my lower back, holding me so I cannot move. Oh fuck. 'Put your hands on either side of your head,' he orders.

I obey immediately.

'Why am I doing this, Naddalin?' He asks.

'Because, I rolled my eyes at you,' I can barely speak.

'Do you think it's polite?'

'No.'

'Do you want to do it again?'

'No.'

'I'll spank you every time you do, you understand?'

Very slowly, he pulls my jogging pants down. Oh, how humiliating, demeaning, scary and hot. He makes such a meal out of it. My heart is in my mouth. I can hardly breathe. Damn, is that gonna hurt?

He puts his hand on my bare bottom, caresses me gently, caresses in circles with his flat palm. And then his hand is no longer there... and he hits me - hard. Oh! My eyes open in response to the pain and I try to stand up, but his hand moves between my shoulder blades and holds me back. He strokes me again where he hit me, and his breathing has changed - it is louder, harder. It hits me repeatedly, quickly away.

Damn it hurts. I made no sound, my face tightened in pain. I try to get away from the hits - stimulated by adrenaline rushes that run through my body.

'Keep still,' he growls. 'Or I'll spank you longer.'

He rubs me now, and the blow follows. A rhythmic pattern emerges, caresses, caresses, hits hard. I must focus to deal with this pain. My mind goes blank as I try to absorb the grueling sensation. He does not hit me twice in a row in the same place - it spreads pain.

'Aargh! I scream at the tenth slap - and I do not know I mentally counted the hits.

'I'm just warming up.'

He hits me again and then he strokes me gently. The combination of the hard blow and his gentle caress is so insane. He hits me again... it gets harder and harder to take.

My face hurts, it is so fucked up. He caresses me gently then the blow comes. I scream again.

'Nobody can hear you, baby, just me.'

-And-

It hits me repeatedly. From somewhere deep inside me, I want to beg him to stop. But I do not. I do not want to give him satisfaction. He continues the relentless pace. I scream six more times. Eighteen slaps in total. My body sings, sings with its ruthless onslaught.

'Enough,' he breathes huskily. 'Nice work, Naddalin. Now I am going to fuck you.'

He gently strokes my butt, and it burns me as it strokes me round and round and down. Suddenly he inserts two fingers inside me, taking me completely by surprise. I gasp, this new assault breaking the numbness around my brain.

'Feel that. Look how much your body likes it, Naddalin. You are soaked just for me.'

There is fear in his voice. He moves his fingers, in and out in quick succession.

I moaned, no surely not, and then his fingers went... and I left craving.

'Next time, I will make you count. Now where is that condom?'

He reaches next to him for the condom and gently lifts me, pushing my face down on the bed. I hear her zipper and the tearing of the foil. He drags my sweatpants and guides me into a kneeling position, gently stroking my now very sore butt.

'I will take you now. You can come,' he whispers.

WhatLike I have a choice.

-And-

He is inside me, filling me up quickly, I moan loudly. He moves, hammers me, a fast and intense pace against my aching behind. The feeling is beyond the exquisite, raw, and demeaning, and breathtaking. My senses are ravaged, disconnected, focusing only on what he is doing to me. What he makes me feel, that familiar pull deep in my stomach, tightening, speeding up. NO... and my treacherous body explodes in an intense and overwhelming orgasm.

'Oh, Naddalin! he screams as he finds his release, holding me in place as he pours himself into me. He collapses, panting hard next to me, and he pulls me on him and buries his face in my hair, holding me close to me.

'Oh, baby,' he breathes. 'Welcome to my world.'

We lie there, panting together, waiting for our breathing to slow down. He gently strokes my hair. I am on his chest again. But this time, I do not have the strength to raise my hand and feel it. Boy... I survived. It was not that bad. I am more

stoic than I thought. My inner goddess is the prostate... well at least she is calm. Grayson rubs my hair again, inhaling deeply.

'Good job, baby,' he whispered, quiet joy in his voice. His words wrap around me like a soft, fluffy Heathman hotel towel, and I am so glad he is happy.

He takes the strap of my tank top.

'Is this what you sleep in?' He asks softly.

'Yes,' I breathe sleepily.

'You should be in silk and satins, beautiful girl. I will take you shopping.'

'I like my sweats,' I whisper, trying and not looking irritated.

He still kisses my head.

'We'll see,' he said.

We lie for a few more minutes, hours, who knows, and I am dozing off.

'I have to go,' he says, and leaning in, he kisses my forehead softly. 'Are you OK?' Her voice is soft.

I think about his question. My back is sore. Well, now, and surprisingly I feel, other than exhausted, beaming. The achievement is humiliating, unexpected. I do not understand. Holy shit.

'I'm fine,' I whisper. I do not want to say more.

He wakes up.

'Where's your bathroom?'

'Along the hallway to the left.'

He takes the other condom and leaves the room. I stand up stiffly and put my jogging pants back on. They rub a little against my still prickly butt. I am so confused by my reaction. I remember him saying - I cannot remember when - that I would feel so much better after a good hiding place. How is that possible so that I do not understand. But strangely, I do. I cannot say I enjoyed the experience I would still

go a long way to avoid it, but now... I have this feeling of security, weird, drenched in the afterglow, full. I put my head in my hands. I just do not understand.

Grayson enters the room again. I cannot look him in the eye. I look at my hands.

'I found some baby oil. Let me rub your bottom.'

What?

'No, I'm fine.'

'Naddalin,' he warns, and I want to roll my eyes but stop quickly. I stand facing the bed. Sitting next to me, he gently pulls my sweatpants down. Go up and down like the drawers of whores my bitterly subconscious remarks. In my head, I tell him where to go.

Grayson throws baby oil in his hand then rubs my butt with careful tenderness - makeup remover to soothing balm for a spanked ass, who would have thought it was such a versatile liquid.

'I like my hands on you,' he whispers, and I must agree, too.

'There,' he says when he is finished and pulls my pants up.

I glance at my clock. It is ten-thirty.

'I'm leaving NOW.'

'I'll see you outside.' I still cannot watch it.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the front door. Fortunately, Maury is still not home. She still has dinner with her parents and Paul. I am glad she was not here to hear my punishment.

'Don't you need to call Stephen?' I ask, avoiding eye contact.

'Stephen has been here since nine o'clock. Look at me,' he hisses.

I find it hard to meet his eyes, but when I do, he looks at me in wonder.

'You haven't cried,' he whispers, then suddenly grabs me, and kisses me fervently. 'Sunday,' he whispers against my lips, and it is both a promise and a threat.

I watch him walk down the path and get into the big black Audi. He does not look back. I close the door and stand helpless in the living room of an apartment where I will only spend two more nights. A place where I have lived happily for almost four years... yet today, for the first time, I feel alone and uncomfortable here, unhappy with my own business. Have I strayed so far from who I am, I know that hiding, not far beneath my numb exterior, is a pit of tears. What do I do? The iroPittsburgh is so bad that I cannot even sit back and enjoy a good cry. I will have to get up. I know it is late, but I decide to call my mom.

'Honey, how are you, how did your graduation go?' she gets excited over the phone. Her voice is a soothing balm.

'Sorry, it's so late,' I whisper.

She pauses.

'Naddalin, what's wrong?' She is all serious now.

'Nothing, mom, I just wanted to hear your voice.'

She is silent for a while.

'Naddalin, what is it, please tell me.' Her voice is soft and comforting, and I know she cares. Without being invited, my tears begin to flow. I have cried so often these past few days.

'Please, Naddalin,' she said, and her anguish mirrored mine.

'Oh, mom, it's a man.'

'What did he do to you?' His alarm is palpable.

'It's not like that.' Although it is... Oh shit. I do not want to worry him. I just want someone else to be strong for me right now.

'Naddalin, please you're worrying me.'

I take a deep breath.

'I fell in love with this guy, and he's so different from me, and I don't know if we should be together.'

'Oh, honey. I wish I could be with you. I am so sorry I missed your degree.'

You fell in love with someone, finally. Oh, honey, men, they are so delicate. They are a distinct species, honey. How long have you known him? '

Grayson is a distinct species... different planets.

'Oh, almost three weeks or more.'

'Naddalin, honey, it is not the time at all. How can you know someone in this kind of weather? Take things easy with him and hold him off until you decide to go. He is worthy of you.'

Wow... it is annoying when my mom is so insightful, but she is too late for that.

Is he worthy of me? It is an interesting concept. I always wonder if I am worthy of him.

'Honey, you look so miserable. Come home - visit us. I miss you, honey. Bob would love to see you too. You can take a step back and maybe take a step back. I need a break. You have worked so hard.'

Oh boy, is that tempting? Flee to Georgia. Take some sun, cocktails

My mother's good humor... her loving arms.

'I have two job interviews in New York on Monday.'

'Oh, that's wonderful news.'

The door opens and Maury appears, smiling at me. Her face falls when she sees that I cry.

'Mom, I must go. I am going to think about a visit. Thank you.'

'Honey, please do not let a man get under your skin. You are too young.'

'Yes, mom, I love you.'

'Oh, Naddalin, I love you too, so much. Stay safe, honey.' I hang up and face Maury who is looking at me.

'Has that obscenely rich asshole upset you yet?'

'No... sort of... uh... yes.'

'Just tell him to take a hike, Naddalin.' You have had some difficulties since you met him.

I have never seen you like this.

The world of Mary Smith is noticeably clear, very black, and white. Not the intangible, mysterious hues, and waves of gray that color my world. Welcome to my world.

'Sit down, let us talk. Let us have some wine. Oh, you had champagne.' She sees the bottle. 'Good things too.'

I smile inefficiently, staring at the couch apprehensively. I approach it with caution.

Hmm... sit down.

'Are you OK?'

'I fell and landed on my butt.'

She does not think to question my explanation because I am one of the least coordinated people in Washington state. I never thought I would see it as a blessing. I sit down cautiously, pleasantly surprised that I am fine, and turn my attention to Maury, but my mind flares up and I am drawn back to the Heathman - 'Well, if you were mine you could not 'sit down for a week after the bang you did yesterday. 'He said so then, and all that

I could focus on being him. All the warning signs were there, I was too ignorant and too in love to notice. Maury returns to the living room with a bottle of red wine and washed teacups. 'Here we are.' She hands me a cup of wine. It will not be as good as the Bolly. 'Naddalin, if he is an idiot with engagement issues, get him

out of the way. Although I do not really understand his engagement issues. He could not take his eyes off you under the marquee, he was looking at you like a hawk. I would say it was. completely enamored, but he has a funny way of showing it. 'Smitten Grayson 'funny way to show it, I'll say.' Maury, it is complicated. How was your evening? I ask. I cannot talk to Maury about it without revealing too much, but one question today

'There and Maury are gone. It is so reassuring to sit down and listen to his normal chatter. The good news is that Paul might come live with us after their vacation. It will be fun - Paul is a hoot.' I frown. I do not think Grayson will approve. Well... hard. He is just going to have to suck it off. I have a few cups of wine tea and decide to call it a night. It has been an exceptionally long day. Maury hugs me, then grabs the phone to call Jack. I check the average machine after brushing my teeth. There is an email from Grayson. From: Grayson Murray Subject: You Date May 26, 2009, 23:14 To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black You are simply exquisite. The most beautiful, intelligent, witty, and courageous woman that I have ever met. Take some Advil - it is not a request. And do not drive your Beetle anymore. I will know. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Oh, do not drive my car anymore! I type my answer. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Flattery Date: May 26, 2009, 11:20 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury Flattery will get you nowhere, but since you have been everywhere, the point is moot. I will have to drive my Beetle to a garage so I can sell it - so I will not graciously accept any of your nonsense about it. Red wine is always preferable to Advil. Naddalin PS Caning is a HARD limit for me.

I hit send. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Frustrated Women Who Can't Accept Compliments Date: May 26, 2009, 11:26 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Mrs. Black, I do not flatter you. You should go to bed. I accept your addition within strict limits. Do not drink too much. Stephen will get rid of your car and get a decent price for it. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Stephen - Is he the right fit for the job? Date: May 26, 2009, 11:40 PM To Grayson Maury Dear, Sir I am intrigued that you are happy to risk letting your right arm drive my car - but not a woman you fuck now and then. How can I be sure that Stephen is the man to find me the best deal for a said car? I have, in the past, before meeting you, known to get a good deal.

Naddalin From: Grayson Murray

Subject: Attention! Date: May 26, 2009, 11:44 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Mrs. Black it is RED WINE talking, and you have had a long day. Although I am tempted to drive back there to make sure you do not sit for a week rather than an evening. Stephen is an ex-army and is capable of riding anything from a motorcycle to a Sherman Tank. Your car is safe for him. Now please do not think of yourself as a woman that I fuck now and then because, frankly, it drives me crazy, and you really would not like me when I am angry. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black Subject: Pay Attention Date: May 26, 2009, 11:57 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury I am not sure I like you anyway, especially now. Mrs. Black From Grayson Murray Subject: Pay attention to yourself Date: May 27, 2009, 12:03 AM To Naddalin Black Why don't you love me? Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Watch Out For Yourself Date: May 27, 2009, 12:09 AM To Grayson Maury Because you never stay with me. There, that gave him to think.

I stop the machine with a momentum that I do not feel and crawl into my bed. I turn off my nightlight and look at the ceiling. It has been a long day, one emotional key after another. It was heartwarming spending time with Ray. He looked good, and strangely he approved of Grayson. Jeez, Maury and his gargantuan mouth. Hear Grayson talk about hunger. What is all this about God and the car? I did not even tell Maury about the new car. What was Grayson thinking? And then tonight he hit me. I have never been touched in my life.

What I got myself into very slowly, my tears, stopped by the arrival of Maury, started to slip down the side of my face and into my ears. I fell in love with someone who is so emotionally closed, I will not be hurt - deep down as I know - someone who by their admission is completely screwed up. Why is he so fucked up? It must be horrible to be as affected as he is, and the thought that as a child he suffered unbearable cruelty makes me cry harder. Maybe if he were more normal he would not want you, my subconscious slyly contributes to my thoughts... and deep in my heart I know it is true.

I transform into a pillow and the floodgates open... and for the first time in years, I sob uncontrollably into my pillow. I am momentarily distracted from my dark soul night by Maury's cries. 'What do you think you're doing here?' 'Well you can't!' 'What the fuck have you done to her now?' 'Ever since she met you, she cries all the

time.' 'You can't come in here!' Grayson bursts into my room and unceremoniously turns on the overhead light, making me squint. 'Jesus, Naddalinh,' he mumbles. He turns off the switch again and is by my side in a moment. 'What are you doing here?' I gasp between sobs. Shit. I cannot stop crying. He turns on the nightlight, making me squint again. Maury comes and stands in the doorway. 'Do you want me to throw that asshole out?' she asks, beaming with thermo-nuclear hostility. Grayson raises his eyebrows at her, no doubt surprised by her flattering epithet and savage antagonism. I shake my head and she rolls her eyes at me. Oh... I would not do that near Mr. G. 'Just scream if you need me,' she said more quietly.

'Maury - your cards are marked,' she hissed at him. He nods to her, and she turns and pulls the door but does not close it. Grayson looks at me, his expression was serious, his face ashen. He wears his pinstriped jacket and from his inside pocket, he takes out a handkerchief and hands it to me. I still have his other somewhere. 'What is happening?' he asks softly. 'Why are you here?' I ask, ignoring his question. My tears miraculously stopped, but I end up with dry breakouts that hollow out my body. 'Part of my role is to take care of your needs. You said you wanted me to stay, so here I am. And yet you like this.' He blinks at me, really taken aback. 'I am sure I am responsible, but I do not know why. Is it because I hit you?' I stand up, wincing from my aching butt. I sit down and face him. 'Did you take Advil?' I shake my head. He narrows his eyes, gets up, and leaves the room. I hear him talking to Maury but not what they say. He was back moments later with some pills and a cup of water. 'Take this,' he orders softly, sitting on my bed next to me. I do what I am told.

'Talk to me,' he whispers. 'You told me you were fine. I would never have left you if I thought you were like this. I look at my hands. What can I say that I have not already said I want more. I want him to stay because he wants to stay with me, not because I am in a mess, and I do not want him to beat me, is that so unreasonable? 'I guess when you said you were okay you were not. I rinse. 'I thought I was fine.' 'Naddalin, you cannot tell me what you think I want to hear. It is not very honest,' he berates me. 'How can I trust everything you have told me?' I look at him, and he frowns, a dark look in his eyes. He runs both hands through his hair.

'How did you feel while I was hitting you and after?' 'I did not like it. I would rather you did not do it again.' 'You weren't supposed to like this.' 'Why do you love him?' I am watching him. My question surprises him. 'Do you want to know?' 'Oh, believe me, I am fascinated.' And I cannot quite keep the Naddalincasm out of my voice. He narrows his eyes again. 'Careful,' he warns. I bleach. 'Are you going to hit me

again?' I challenge myself. 'Not tonight.' Phew... my subconscious and I both have a silent sigh of relief. 'So,' I invite him. 'I like the control it gives me, Naddalin. I want you to behave especially, and if you do not, I will punish you, and you will learn to behave the way I want. I like to punish you.

I have wanted to spank you ever since you asked me if I was gay. 'I am flushing the memory. Damn, I wanted to spank myself after that question. So Mary Smith is responsible for all of this, and if she had gone to this interview and asked her gay question, she would be sitting here with her ass sore.. I do not like that thought. How confusing is that? 'So you don't like who I am.' He looks at me, puzzled again. 'You are beautiful the way you are.' 'So why are you trying to change me?' 'I do not want to change you. I would like you to be courteous and follow all the rules I gave you and do not challenge me. Simple,' said 'But you want to punish me?' 'Yes.' 'That's what I don't understand.' He sighs and runs his hands through his hair again. 'That's how I am made, Naddalin. I need to control you. I need you to behave a certain way, and if you do not - I love watching your beautiful alabaster skin turn pink and warm under my hands. It excites me. ' Holy shit. Now we are getting somewhere. 'So it's not the pain you're giving me?' He swallows. 'A little, to see if you can take it, but that is not the whole reason. It is the fact that you are mine to do whatever I want - ultimate control over someone else. And that turns me on. Big time, Naddalin. Look, I cannot explain myself very well... I have never had to do this before.

I have not thought deeply about it. I have always been with it. like-minded people. 'He shrugs in apology.' And you still have not answered my question - how did you feel afterward? ' Confused. ' You got sexually turned on by it. That, Naddalin, 'he briefly closes his eyes, and when he opens them again and looks at me, they burn smoky embers. His expression pulls on that dark part of me, buried deep in my stomach - my libido, awakened and tamed. by him, but still now, insatiable. 'Don't look at me like that,' he whispers. I frown. Jeez, what have I done now? 'I have no preserved motions, Naddalin, and you know, you are upset. Contrary to what your roommate thinks, I am not a priapic freak. So, did you feel confused? I squirm under his intense gaze. 'You have no problem being honest with me in print. Your emails always tell me exactly how you feel. Why can't you do that in conversation, am I intimidating you so much?' I chose an imaginary spot on my mom's blue and cream quilt. 'You surprise me, Grayson. It completely overwhelms me. I feel like Icarus flying too close to the Sun,' I whisper. He gasps. 'Well, you got that the wrong way,' he

whispers. 'What?' 'Oh, Naddalin, you have bewitched me. Isn't that obvious?' No, not to me. Bewitched... my inner goddess looks open-mouthed.

Even she does not believe it. 'You still have not answered my question. Write me an email, please. But for now, I would really like to sleep. Can I stay?' 'You want to stay?' I cannot hide the hope in my voice. 'You wanted me here.' 'You didn't answer my question.' 'I'll write you an email,' he mumbles excitedly. Standing, he empties his pockets of BlackBerry jeans, keys, wallet, and cash. Holy cow, men have a lot of shit in their pockets. He takes off his watch, shoes, socks, and jeans and places his jacket on my chair. He goes to the other side of the bed and slips. 'Lie down,' he orders. I slowly slip under the covers, wincing slightly, looking at him.

Damn... he is staying. I am numb with elated shock. He leans on one elbow and looks at me. 'If you are going to cry. Cry in front of me. I need to know.' 'Do you want me to cry?' 'Not particularly. I just want to know how you feel. I do not want you to slip through my fingers. Turn off the light. It is late, and we both must work tomorrow.' So here... and always. also bossy, but I cannot complain he is in my bed. I do not understand why... I should cry more often in front of me. I turn off the bedside lamp. 'Lie on your side, facing me,' he whispers in the darkness. I roll my eyes knowing he cannot see me, but I do as I am told. Carefully he moves and puts his arms around me and pulls me to his chest... oh my God. 'Sleep, baby,' he whispers, and I can feel his nose in my hair as he inhales deeply. Holy cow. Grayson Maury sleeps with me, and in the comfort and solace of his arms, I wake up to a peaceful sleep.

The candle flame is too hot. It sparkles and dances in the too hot breeze, a breeze that brings no respite from the heat. Soft gossamer wings float in the darkness, sprinkling dusty scales in the circle of light. I find it hard to resist, but I am attracted. And then it is so bright, and I am flying too close to the sun, dazzled by the light, fried, and melting from the heat, weary of my efforts to stay aloft. I am so warm. The heat... it is stifling, overwhelming. It wakes me up.

I open my eyes and am draped in Grayson Murray. It is wrapped around me like a victory flag. He sleeps soundly with his head on my chest, his arm on me, holding me against me, one of his legs thrown back and hanging around mine. He suffocates me with his body heat and he is heavy. I take a moment to realize that he is still in my bed and sleeping soundly, and it is bright outside - in the morning. He spent the whole night with me.

My right arm is outstretched, looking for a cool spot, and as I assess the fact that he is still with me, the idea occurs to me that I can touch him. He is asleep. Tentatively, I raise my hand and run my fingers behind her back. Deep in his throat, I hear a soft moan of distress, and he stirs. He stroked my chest, inhaling deeply as he woke up. Sleeping, blinking gray eyes meet mine under her tousled mop.

'Hello,' he mumbles and frowns. 'Jesus, even in my sleep I am drawn to you.' He moves slowly, loosening his limbs from me as he comes to his senses. I become

aware of his erection against my hip. He notices my reaction with wide eyes, and he smiles a slow, sexy smile.

'Hmm... that has possibilities, but I think we should wait until Sunday.' He leans in and strokes my ear with his nose.

I blush, but then I feel seven shades of scarlet of her warmth.

'You are very hot,' I whisper.

'You're not that bad yourself,' he whispers and presses himself against me, suggestively.

I hunt a little more. That is not what I meant. He leans on his elbow and looks at me, amused. He leans in and, to my surprise, plants a soft kiss on my lips.

'Sleep well?' he asks.

I nod, staring at him, and realize that I slept well except for the last half hour when I was too hot.

'Me too.' He frowns. 'Yeah, really good.' He raises his eyebrows in confused surprise.

'What time is it?'

I glance at my alarm.

'It's 7:30 am.'

'7:30 am... shit.' He gets out of bed and hangs out on his jeans.

It is my turn to look amused as I sit down. Grayson Maury is late and pissed off. This is something I had never seen before. I realize belatedly that my behind is no longer sore.

'You have such a bad influence on me. I have a meeting. I must go - I must be in Pittsburgh by eight o'clock. Are you smiling at me?

'Yes.'

He smiles.

'I am late. I am not late. Another first, Miss Black.' He pulls on his jacket, then leans over and grabs my head, his hands on either side.

'Sunday,' he says, and the word is loaded with an unspoken promise. Deep in my body unfolds then tightens in delicious anticipation, the feeling is exquisite. Damn, if my mind could just follow my body. He leans in and kisses me quickly. He grabs his things from my side table and his shoes - which he does not put on.

'Stephen will come and sort your Beetle. I was serious. Do not drive. I will see you at my house on Sunday. I will email you.' And like a whirlwind, it is gone.

Oh my God, Grayson Maury spent the night with me, and I feel rested. And there was no sex, only hugs. He told me he had never slept with anyone - but he slept with me three times.

I smile and slowly get out of bed. I feel more optimistic than I have in a day or two. I head for the kitchen, needing a cup of tea.

After breakfast, I shower and get dressed quickly for my last day at Eastwood's. It is the end of an era - goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood, OVHS, York, the apartment, my Beetle. I look at the nasty machine - it is only 7:52 am. I have time.

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Assault and drums: The aftermath Date: May 27, 2009, 8:05 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

You wanted to know why I felt confused after you - what euphemism should we apply - spanked, punished, beaten, assaulted me. Well, during the whole alarming process I felt humiliated, degraded, and abused. And to my mortification, you are right, I was excited, and it was unexpected. As you well know, everything sexual is new to me - I just wish I were more experienced and therefore more prepared. I was shocked to feel excited.

What worried me was how I felt afterward. And it is more difficult to articulate.

I was happy that you were happy. I felt relieved that it was not as painful as I thought. And when I was lying in your arms, I felt - full. But I feel extremely uncomfortable, even guilty, feeling that way. It does not suit me and I am confused as a result. Does that answer your question?

I hope the world of mergers and acquisitions is more exciting than ever... and that you are not too late.

Thanks for staying with me.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Free Your Mind

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:24 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Interesting... if a little over the top Miss Black header.

To answer your questions:

I am going to go with the spanking - because that is what it was.

So you felt demeaned, degraded, mistreated, and assaulted - how much Tess Durbeyfield of you. It was you who decided on the debasement if I remember correctly. Do you feel like this or do you think you should feel like this?

Two quite different things. If that is how you feel, do you think you could just try to embrace those feelings, deal with them, to me that is what a submissive would do?

I appreciate your inexperience. I appreciate it and am only beginning to understand what it means. Simply put... it means you are mine in every way.

Yes, you were excited which in turn was overly exciting, there is nothing wrong with that.

Happy did not even begin to cover up what I was feeling. Ecstatic joy draws near.

Punishing spanking hurts a lot more than sensual spanking - so it is about as hard as it can be unless of course, you are committing a major transgression, in which case I will use a tool to punish you. My hand was very sore. But I love this.

I also felt full - more than you could ever imagine.

Do not waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc. We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between us. You must free your mind and listen to your body.

The world of mergers and acquisitions is not as exciting as you are Miss Black.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit... mine in every way. My breathing is blocked.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: consenting adults!

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:26 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Are you not in a meeting?

I am glad you have a pain in your hand.

-And-

If I listened to my body, I would now be in Alaska.

Naddalin

PS I will think about embracing these feelings.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: You did not call the police officers

Date: May 27, 2009 8:35 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

I am in a meeting to discuss the futures market if you are interested.

For the record - you stood next to me knowing what I was going to do.

You never asked me to stop - you did not use either of the two safety words.

You are an adult - you have choices.

Frankly, I cannot wait for the next time my palm tingles with pain.

You are not listening to the right part of your body.

Alaska is very cold and there is no place to run. I will find you.

I can track your cell phone - remember?

Go to work.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I frown on the screen. He is of course right. It is my choice. Hmm. Is he serious about coming to find me if I decide to escape for a while? My mind briefly turns to my mother's offer. I hit on the answer.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Stalker

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:36 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Have you sought therapy for your stalker tendencies?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Stalker?

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:38 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I pay the eminent Dr. LORENZO a small fortune concerning my stalker and other tendencies.

Go to work.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Maury Enterprises Holdings Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Item: Expensive Charlatans

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:40 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

May I humbly suggest that you seek a second opinion?

I am not sure Dr. LORENZO is amazingly effective.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Second Opinion

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:43 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

It is not whether it is your business, humble or not, but Dr. LORENZO is my second opinion.

You will have to speed up, in your new car, putting yourself at unnecessary risk - I think that is against the rules.

GO TO WORK.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: SHOUTY CAPITALS

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:47 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

As the object of your stalker tendencies - I think that is my business.

I have not signed yet. So rules schedules. And I do not start until 9:30 a.m.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Descriptive linguistics

Date: May 27, 2009, 8:49 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Schedules I do not know where it appears in the Webster Grayson Murray dictionary

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Descriptive linguistics

Date: May 27, 2009 8:52 a.m.

To: Grayson Maury

It is between the control freak and the stalker.

And descriptive linguistics is a difficult limit for me.

Will you stop bothering me now?

I would like to go to work in my new car.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Stimulating but fun young women

Date: May 27, 2009 8:56 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

My palm contracts.

Drive carefully, Miss Black.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

The Audi is a pleasure to drive. It has power steering. Wanda, my Beetle, has no power in her - Pittsburgh where, so my daily training, which was driving my Beetle, will cease. Oh, but I will have a personal trainer to go up against, by Grayson's rules. I frown. I hate to exercise.

While driving, I try to cripple our email exchange. Sometimes he is a condescending son of a bitch. And then I think of Billie and I feel guilty. But of course, she was not his biological mother. Hmm, it is an entire world of unknown pain. Well, the condescending son of a bitch works fine then. Yes. I am an adult, thank you for reminding me, Grayson Maury, and it is my choice. Problem is, I just want Grayson, not

all his... luggage - and now he has a 747 baggage compartment. Could I just lay down and kiss her like a submissive, I said I would try. This is an excessively big request.

I pull up to Eastwood's parking lot. As I walk in, I can hardly believe this is my last day. Fortunately, the store is busy and time flies. At lunchtime, Mr. Eastwood takes me off the reserve. He is standing next to a courier on a motorbike.

'Miss Black? asks the courier. I frown questioningly at Mr. Eastwood, who shrugs, as puzzled as I am. My heart sinks. What did Grayson send me now? I sign for the small package and open it right away. It is a BlackBerry. My heart squeezes more. I turn it on.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: BlackBerry READY

Date: May 27, 2009 11:15 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I need to be able to contact you at any time, and since this is your most honest form of communication, I figured you needed a BlackBerry.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Consumerism has gone mad

Date: May 27, 2009, 1:22 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

You need to call Dr. LORENZO right away.

Your stalker tendencies are unleashed.

I am at work. I will email you when I get home.

Thanks for another gadget.

I was not wrong when I said you were the ultimate consumer.

Why are you doing this?

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: The sagacity of such a young person

Date: May 27, 2009, 1:24 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Just well done, as always Miss Black.

Dr. LORENZO is on vacation.

And- I do this because I can.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I put the thing in my back pocket, I already hate it. Emailing Grayson is addictive, but I am supposed to be working. He buzzes against my behind once... as appropriate, I think ironically, but summoning all my willpower, I ignore him.

At four o'clock Mr. and Mrs. Eastwood round up all the other employees of the shop, and in an embarrassing and curly speech, hand me a check for three hundred dollars.

At that point, three weeks - exams, graduation, intense and fucked up billionaires, deflowering, hard and soft boundaries, non-console game rooms, helicopter rides - and the fact that I am moving tomorrow, all is well with me. Surprisingly, I stand together. My subconscious is in awe. I hug the Eastwoods. They have been kind and generous employers, and I will miss them.

Maury gets out of his car when I get home.

'What is that?' she said accusingly, pointing to the Audi. I can not resist.

'It's a car,' I say ironically. She narrows her eyes, and for a moment, I wonder if she is going to put me on her knee too. 'My graduation gift.' I try to be nonchalant. Yes, I get expensive cars every day. Her mouth opens.

'Generous, exaggerated bastard, isn't it?'

I agree.

'I tried not to take it, but frankly it just isn't worth it.'

Maury tightens his lips.

'No wonder you are so overwhelmed. I noticed he stuck.'

'Yes.' I smile wistfully.

'Have we finished packing?'

I nod and follow her inside. I am checking Grayson's email.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sunday

Date: May 27, 2009 1:40 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Should I see you at 1 p.m. Sunday?

The doctor will be in Escala to see you at 1:30 am.

I am leaving for New York now.

Hope your move goes well and look forward to Sunday.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Hell, he could be discussing the weather. I decided to email him once we are done packing, he can be so much fun in a minute, then he can be so formal and stuffy. It is hard to follow. Honestly, it is like emailing an employee. I look up and join Maury to pack her bags.

Maury and I are in the kitchen when there is a knock on the door. Stephen stands on the porch, looking immaculate in his suit. I notice the trace of ex-army in his buzzing cut, his neat physique, and his cold gaze.

'Miss Black,' he said. 'I came for your car.'

'Oh yes, sure. Come in, I will get the keys.'

It is surely beyond the call of duty. I wonder again about Stephen's job description. I give him the keys and we walk in uncomfortable silence for me - towards the light blue Ladybug. I open the door and remove the flashlight from the glove box. That is it...!

I have nothing else personal in Wanda. Goodbye, Wanda. Thank you. I stroke its roof as I close the passenger door.

'How long have you worked for Mr. Maury?' I ask.

'Four years, Miss Black.'

Suddenly, I have an irresistible urge to bombard him with questions. What this man needs to know about Grayson, all his secrets. But then he signed an NDA.

I look at him nervously. He has the same taciturn expression as Ray, and I am warm to him.

'He's a good man, Miss Black,' he said, and he smiled slightly. With that, he gives me a little nod, gets in my car, and walks away.

Apartment, Beetle, Eastwoods - everything has changed now. I shake my head as I walk inside. And the biggest change of all is Grayson Maury. Stephen thinks he is a good man.

Can I believe it?

Sam joins us with a Chinese dish at eight o'clock. Had finished. We are excited and ready to go. He brings several bottles of beer, and Maury and I sit on the couch while he is cross-legged on the floor between us. We watch crappy TV, drink beer, and as the evening wears on us fondly and loudly remember the effect of beer. It has been a good four years.

The atmosphere between Sam and I returned to normal, the attempted kiss forgotten. Well, he has been swept under the carpet that my inner goddess is lying on, eating grapes, and patting her fingers, not so patiently waiting for Sunday. There is a knock on the door and my heart jumps in my throat. Really?

Maury answers the door and is nearly run over by Jack. He grabs her in a Hollywood-style clinch that quickly turns into a European art-house embrace. Honestly... take a room. Sam and I look at each other. I am appalled at their lack of modesty.

'Shall we go down to the bar?' I ask Sam, who nods frantically. We are too uncomfortable with the rampant sexing going on in front of us. Maury looked up at me, red and his eyes shining.

'Sam and I are going for a drink.' I look up at her. Ha! I can still roll my eyes at my own pace.

'Alright,' she smiles.

'Hi Jack, bye Jack.'

He gives me a big blue eye, and Sam and I are outside, laughing like teenagers. Going down to the bar, I put my arm through Sam's. My God, it is so simple

- I had not enjoyed it before.

'You will always come to the opening of my show, won't you?'

'Of course, Sam, when is that?'

'June 9'

'What day is it?' I suddenly panic.

'It's a Thursday.'

'Yeah, I should do that... and you gonna visit us in New York?'

'Try to stop me.' He smiles.

It is late when I come home from the bar. Maury and Jack are nowhere but we can hear them. Holy shit. Hope I am not that loud. I know Grayson is not. I blushed

at the thought and escaped to my room. After a brief hug not at all awkward, thank you, Sam left. I do not know when I will see him again, his photo exhibit, and again I am blown away that he finally has an exhibit. I will miss him and his boyish charm. I could not bring myself to tell him about the beetle, I know he will panic when he finds out, and I can only deal with one man at a time panicking at me. Once in my room, I check the average machine, and of course, there is an email from Grayson.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Where are you?

Date: May 27, 2009 10:14 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

'I am at work. I will email you when I get home.

Are you still at work or have you packed your phone, BlackBerry, and MacBook?

Call me, or I might have to call Jack.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Shit... Sam... shit.

I take my phone. Five missed calls and one voice message. In the meantime, I listen to the message. It is Grayson.

'You need to learn so I get it done to my expectations. I am not a patient man. If you say you will contact me after the job is done, you should have the decency to do so. Otherwise, I worry, and it is not an emotion that I know and I do not tolerate it very well. Call me.'

Double shit. Will, he ever give me a break? I frown on the phone. He is choking me. With deep terror rolling in my stomach, I scroll to his number and press the dial. My heart is in my mouth as I wait for it to respond. He would like to beat me Seven Shades of Crap. The thought is depressing.

'Hi,' he said softly, and his response throws me off balance because I expect his anger, but if anything, he seems relieved.

'Hi,' I whisper.

'I was worried about you.'

'I know. I am sorry I did not answer, but I am fine.'

He stops for a moment.

'Did you have a pleasant evening?' He is perfectly polite.

'Yes. We finished packing and Maury and I shared a Chinese takeout with Sam.' I close my eyes firmly as I say Sam's name. Grayson said nothing.

'And you?' I ask to fill the sudden deafening chasm of silence. I will not let him blame me for Sam.

Finally, he sighs.

'I went to a fundraising dinner. It was dull. I left as soon as I could.'

He looks so sad and resigned. My heart sinks. I imagine him there are all those nights sitting at the piano in his huge living room and the unbearable bittersweet slenderness of the music he was playing.

'I wish you were here,' I whisper because I want to hold him in his arms. Appear him.

Even- if he does not leave me. I want his proximity.

'Do you?' he whispers. Holy mackerel. It does not sound like him, and my scalp stings with dawning apprehension.

'Yes,' I breathe. After an eternity, he sighs.

'Will I see you on Sunday?'

'Yes, Sunday,' I whispered, and a shiver ran through my body.

'Good evening.'

'Good night sir.'

My skill catches him off guard, I can tell by his strong inspiration.

'Good luck with your move tomorrow, Naddalin.' Her voice is soft. And we are both hanging on the phone like teenagers, neither of us wanting to hang up.

'You hang up,' I whisper. Finally, I can feel his smile.

'No, you hang up.' And I know he is smiling.

'I do not want to.'

'Me neither.'

'Were you incredibly angry with me?

'Yes.'

'Are you still?'

'No.'

'So you're not going to punish me?'

'No, I'm a type of guy right now.'

'I noticed.'

'You can hang up now, Miss Black.'

'Do you really want me to do this, sir?'

'Go to bed, Naddalin.'

'Yes sir.'

We both stay online.

'Do you think you will be able to do as you are told?' He is amused and exasperated at the same time.

'Maybe. We will see after Sunday.' And I hit 'end' on the phone.

Jack stands up and admires his work. He reconnected our TV to the satellite system in our Pike Place Market apartment. Maury and I collapse on the couch laughing, in awe of his prowess with an electric drill. The flat-screen looks odd compared to the masonry in the converted warehouse, but I will get used to it.

'See, baby, easy.' He smiles a wide, white-toothed smile at Maury, and she dissolves into the couch.

I look up at both.

'I would love to stay, baby, but my sister is back from Paris. It is a compulsory family dinner tonight.'

'Can you come after?' Maury asks shyly, all sweet and non-Murray Like.

I get up and go to the kitchen under the pretext of unpacking one of the crates. They will become disgusting.

'I'll see if I can escape,' he promises.

'I'll go down with you.' Maury smiles.

'see yes, Naddalin. Jack smiles.

'Goodbye, Jack. Say hello to Grayson for me.'

'Just hello?' His eyebrows rise suggestively.

'Yes.' I rinse. He winks at me and I turn crimson as he follows Maury out of the apartment. Jack is adorable and so different from Grayson. He is warm, open, physical, very physical, too physical, with Maury. They can barely hold hands - to be honest, it is embarrassing - and I am green with envy.

Maury returns about twenty minutes later with a pizza, and we sit, surrounded by crates, in our new open space, eating straight from the box. Maury's dad made us proud. The apartment is not large, but it is quite large, with three bedrooms and a large living space that overlooks the Pike Place market itself. It is all solid wood and red brick floors, and the kitchen tops are smooth concrete, very utilitarian, very now. We both love being in the heart of the city.

At eight o'clock, the entrance phone is buzzing. Maury leaps - and my heart leaps into my mouth.

'Delivery, Miss Black, Miss Smith.' DECEPTION flows freely and unexpectedly in my veins. It is not Grayson.

'Second floor, apartment two.'

Maury brings in the delivery guy. His mouth opens when he sees Maury, all skinny jeans, a t-shirt, hair piled high with escaping tendrils. It has this effect on men. He is holding a bottle of champagne with a helicopter-shaped balloon attached. She gives him a bright smile to send him on her way and starts reading the map to me.

Ladies, good luck in your new home, Grayson Murray. Maury shakes his head in disapproval. 'Why can't he just write' from Grayson's 'And what's with the weird helicopter balloon?' 'Fake and Gay. 'What?' 'Grayson took me to New York in his helicopter.' I shrug my shoulders. Maury looks at me speechless. I have to say - I love these occasions - Mary Smith, silent and stunned, they are so rare. I take a brief, luxurious moment to enjoy it. 'Yes, he has a helicopter, which he piloted himself,' I say proudly. 'Of course, that obscenely rich bastard has a helicopter. Why didn't you tell me?' Maury looks at me accusingly, but she smiles, shaking her head in disbelief. 'I've had a lot on my mind lately.' She frowns. 'Are you going to be okay while I'm away?'

'Of course.' I respond reassuringly. New town, no job... crazy boyfriend. 'Did you give him our address?' No, but harassment is one of his specialties. 'I think, down to earth. Maury's brow furrows more.' Somehow I am not surprised. He worries me, Naddalin. At least it is a glass of good champagne and it is fresh. 'Of course, only Grayson would send chilled champagne or ask his secretary to do it... or Stephen. We open it right away and find our teacups - those were the last items to go. wrap. 'Bollinger Grande Annee Rose 1999, a great vintage.' I smile at Murray and we clink cups of tea. I wake up early to a gray Sunday morning after a surprisingly refreshing night's sleep and stay awake looking at my crates. You should be unwrapping them, my subconscious tormentors, chasing her harpy lips together. No... today is the day. My inner goddess is beside herself, hopping about at full length. Anticipation is heavy and heavy above my head like a dark tropical storm cloud. Butterflies flood my stomach - as well as a darker, carnal, and captivating ache as I try to imagine what he will do to me... and of course I must sign this audit contract or I, do not hear the clicking of incoming mail from the mean machine on the floor next to my bed.

From: Grayson Murray Subject: My life in numbers Date: May 29, 2009, 8:04 AM To Naddalin Black If you are driving you will need this access code for the Escala underground garage: 146963 Park in bay 5 - he is one of mine. Elevator Code: 1880 Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: An Excellent Vintage Date: May 29, 2009, 8:08 AM To Grayson Maury Yes Sir. Heard. Thanks for the champagne and the Fake and Gay explosion, who is now strapped to my bed. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Envy Date: May 29, 2009, 8:11 AM To Naddalin Black You're welcome. Do not be late. Lucky Fake and Gay. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. I roll my eyes at his authority, but his last line makes me smile. I head to the bathroom, wondering if Jack came back last night and trying to hold me back. I can drive the Audi in high heels! At 12.55 p.m. precisely, I parked in the Escala garage and I parked in bay five. How many berries does he have? The Audi SUV is there, the R8 and two smaller Audi SUVs... hmm.

I check my rarely worn mascara in the lighted vanity mirror in my sun visor. I did not have one in the Beetle. Come on girl! My inner goddess has her pom-poms in her hand - she is in cheerleading mode. In the elevator's endless mirrors, I gaze at my plum dress, well - Maury's plum dress. The last time I wore it, he wanted to take it off. My body tensed at the thought. Oh my God, the feeling is just exquisite, and I catch my breath. I am wearing the underwear Stephen bought me. I blush at the thought of his buzz-cut wandering the aisles of Agent Provocateur or wherever he bought it. The doors open and I face the hall of apartment number one. Stephen stands in front of the double doors as I step out of the elevator. 'Hello, Miss Black,' he said. 'Oh, please call me, Naddalin.' he smiles. 'Mr. Maury is waiting for you.' I bet he is. Grayson sits on the sofa in his living room reading the Sunday papers. He looks up as Stephen directs me to the living room.

The play is exactly as I remember it - I have been here for a week - but it has been so much longer. Grayson looks cool and calm he looks heavenly. He wears a loose white linen shirt and jeans, no shoes, or socks. Her hair is tousled and unkempt, and her gray eyes sparkle badly at me. He is incredibly handsome. He gets up and walks over to me, and appreciative amused smile on his beautiful sculpted lips. I stand still at the entrance of the room, paralyzed by its beauty and the sweet anticipation of what is to come. The familiar charge between us is there, slowly springing into my stomach, pulling me towards him. 'Hmm... that dress,' he whispered approvingly, looking at me. 'Welcome back, Miss Black,' he whispers, and squeezing my chin, he

leans in and offers a soft, light kiss to my lips. The contact of his lips with mine reverberates throughout my body.

My breathing is blocked. 'Hi,' I whisper, rinsing off. 'You're on time. I like punctuality. Come on.' He takes my hand and leads me to the sofa. 'I wanted to show you something,' he says as we sit down. He hands me the New York Times. On page eight there is a photo of the two of us at the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh together. Holy shit. I am in the newspaper. I check the caption. Grayson Maury and friend at the graduation ceremony in Pittsburgh at OVHS York. I laugh. 'So I am your 'friend' now.' 'So it would show. And it is in the newspaper, so it must be true.' He smiles. Sitting next to me, her whole body is turned towards me, one of her legs tucked under the other. Reaching out, he tucks my hair behind my ear with his long index finger. My body comes to life on contact, waiting and necessarily.

-And-

'So, Naddalin, you have a much better idea of what I've been doing since you were last here.' 'Yes.' 'Where is he going with that? 'And yet you came back.' I nod shyly and his gray eyes shine. He shakes his head slightly as if he is struggling with the idea. 'Did you eat?' he asks unexpectedly. Shit. 'No.' 'You are hungry?' He tries not to look bored. 'Not for food,' I whisper, and his nostrils flare up slightly in reaction. He leans forward and whispers in my ear. 'You're still so impatient, Miss Black, and just letting you in on a little secret, too.' But Dr. Greene is due to come shortly. He sits up. 'I would like you to eat,' he scolds me softly. My hot blood is cooling. Holy cow - the doctor. I had forgotten. 'What can you tell me about Dr Greene?' I ask to distract us both. 'She's the best Ob / Gyn in New York.'

'What more can I say?' He shrugs his shoulders. 'I thought I was seeing your doctor, and do not tell me you are really a woman, because I will not believe you. He gives me a not ridiculous look. 'It is more appropriate for you to see a specialist. Isn't it?' he said softly. I agree. Saint Moses, if she is the best obstetrician / gynecologist, he scheduled her to see me on a Sunday - at noon! I cannot begin to imagine how much it costs. Grayson suddenly frowns as if he remembers something unpleasant. 'Naddalin, my mom would like you to come to dinner tonight. Jack asks Maury that too.'

I do not know how you feel about it. It will be strange for me to introduce my family to you. Odd Why? 'Are you ashamed of me?' I cannot stop the injured from

coming out of my voice. 'Of course not.' He rolls his eyes at me. 'Why is this weird?' 'Because I've never done it before.' 'Why are you allowed to roll your eyes, and I'm not?' He blinks. 'I didn't know I was.' 'Me neither, usually,' I told him. Grayson looks at me, speechless. Stephen appears at the door. 'Dr. Greene is here, sir.'

'Show her Miss Black room.' Miss Black room! 'Ready for contraception?' He asks, standing up and holding out his hand to me. 'You're not going to come like' I gasped, shocked. He is laughing. 'I would pay a lot of money to watch, trust me, Naddalin, but I don't think the good doctor would approve.' I take his hand, and he pulls me into his arms and kisses me deeply. I clutch on his arms, taken by surprise. His hand is in my hair holding my head, and he pulls me against him, his forehead against mine. 'I am so happy that you 'I'm here,' he whispers. 'I cannot wait to get you naked.'

Dr. Greene is tall, blond, and immaculate, wearing a royal blue suit. I remember the women who work in Grayson's office. She is like an identikit model - another blond-haired person from Stepford. Her long hair is swept back into an elegant bun. She must be in her early forties.

'Mr. Maury. She shakes Grayson's outstretched hand.

'Thanks for coming on such short notice,' says Grayson.

'Thanks for making it worth it, Mr. Maury. Miss Black.' She smiles, her eyes cold and evaluating.

We shake hands, and I know she is one of those women who will not readily tolerate fools. Like Maury. I like it right away. She gives Grayson a sharp look, and after an awkward kick, he takes his cue.

'I'll be downstairs,' he mumbles and leaves what will be my room.

'Well, Miss Black. Mr. Maury pays me a small fortune to take care of you. What can I do for you?

After careful consideration and a long discussion, Dr. Greene and I decide on the mini pill. She writes me a prepaid prescription and asks me to pick them up tomorrow. I love her no-frills attitude - she taught me until she was as blue as her dress about taking it at the same time every day. And I can say she is burning with curiosity about my alleged relationship with Mr. Maury. I do not give him any details. Somehow, I do not think she would look so calm and collected if she had seen her

room red with pain. I blush as we walk through his closed door and walk back down to the art gallery which is Grayson's living room.

Grayson is reading, sitting on his couch. A breathtaking tune plays over the music system, swirling around it, cocooning it, filling the room with a sweet and moving song.

For a moment, he looks serene. He turns and looks at us as we walk in and smiles warmly at me.

'Have you finished?' he asks as if he is interested. He points the remote at an elegant white box under the fireplace that houses his iPod, and the exquisite melody fades but continues in the background. Standing, he walks towards us.

'Yes, Mr. Maury. Take care of her; she is a beautiful and bright young woman.'

Grayson is taken aback - so am I. What an inappropriate thing for a doctor to say. Does she give him some not-so-subtle warning that Grayson is recovering?

'I have every intention of doing it,' he mumbles, puzzled.

Looking at him, I shrug, embarrassed.

'I'll send you my bill,' she said dryly, shaking his hand.

'Good day and good luck to you, Naddalin.' She smiles, her eyes narrowed as she does when we shake hands.

Stephen appears out of nowhere to escort her through the double doors and to the elevator. How does he do this? Where is he hiding?

'How was it?' Grayson asks.

'All right, thank you. She said I should refrain from all sexual activity for the next four weeks.' The mouth of Grayson opens in shock, and I cannot keep a straight face and smile at him like an idiot anymore.

'I got you!'

He narrows his eyes and I immediately stop laughing. He looks off-putting. Oh shit. My subconscious curdles in the corner as all the blood drains from my face, and I imagine her getting onto her knee again.

'I got you!' he said with a smirk. He grabs me around my waist and pulls me against him. 'You are incorrigible, Miss Black,' he whispers, fixing my eyes as he weaves his fingers through my hair, holding me firmly in place. He kisses me hard, and I hold onto his muscular arms for support.

'As much as I would like to take you here, now you need to eat and so do I.' I do not want you to pass out later, 'he whispered against my lips.

'Is that all you want from me for - my body?' I whisper.

'That and your smart mouth,' he breathes.

He kisses me passionately again, then releases me abruptly, taking my hand and leading me to the kitchen. I am in shock. One minute we are joking and the next... I wake up my heated face. It is just sex on my legs, and now I must regain my balance and eat something. The air always plays in the background.

'What's the music?'

'Villa Lobos, an aria by Bachianas Brasileiras. Good, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I whisper in total agreement.

The breakfast bar is suitable for two; Grayson takes a bowl from the fridge.

'Chicken Caesar salad, does it go with you?'

Oh, thank goodness nothing too heavy.

'Yes very good thank you.'

I watch him move Billie fully around his kitchen. He is so comfortable with his body on some level, but then he does not like to be touched... so maybe deep down he is not. No man is an island, I think - except maybe Grayson Maury.

'What are you thinking about?' he asks, pulling me out of my reverie. I rinse.

'I was just watching the way you move.'

He raises an eyebrow, amused.

'And?' He said dryly.

I hunt a little more.

'You are very gracious.'

'Why thank you, Miss Black,' he whispers. He sits next to me, holding a bottle of wine. 'Chablis?'

'Please.'

'Help yourself to the salad,' he said softly.

'Tell me - which method did you choose?'

I am momentarily overwhelmed by his question, when I realize that he is talking about Dr. Greene's visit: 'Mini pill'.

He frowns.

'And will you remember to take it regularly, at the right time, every day?'

Jeez... of course, I will. How does he know I blush at the thought, one or more of the fifteen.

'I'm sure you'll remind me,' I whisper dryly.

He looks at me with amused condescension.

'I'll put an alarm on my calendar.' He smiles. 'Eat.'

Chicken Cabana is delicious. To my surprise, I am hungry and for the first time since I have been with him, I finish my meal before him. The wine is lively, clean, and fruity.

'More impatient than ever, Miss Black?' He smiles at my empty plate.

I look at him under my eyelashes.

'Yes,' I whisper.

His breath stops. And as he looks at me, I feel the atmosphere between us slowly changing, evolving... charging. His gaze changes from dark to scorching, taking me with him.

He stands up, narrows the distance between us, and pulls me from my barstool into his arms.

'Do you want to do this?' he breathes, looking at me attentively.

'I didn't sign anything.'

'I know - but I'm breaking all the rules these days.'

'Are you going to hit me?'

'Yes, but it won't be to hurt you.' I do not want to punish you right now. If you had caught me last night, well, that would have been a different story.

Holy cow. He wants to hurt me... how do you deal with this? I cannot hide the horror on my face.

'Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise, Naddalin. One of the reasons people like me do this is because we like to give or receive pain. It is amazingly simple.'

'You don't, so I spent a lot of time yesterday thinking about it.'

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He pulls me against him, and his erection is buried in my stomach. I should run, but I cannot. I am drawn to him on a deep elementary level, which I cannot begin to understand

'Did you draw any conclusions?' I whisper.

'No, and now I just want to tie you up and fuck you for no reason. Are you ready for this?'

'Yeah,' I breathe as everything in my body tightens at the same time... wow.

'Good. Come on.' He takes my hand and leaves all the dirty dishes on the breakfast counter, and we go upstairs.

My heart begins to beat. That is it. I am going to do this. My inner goddess spins like a world-class ballet dancer, pirouette after pirouette. He opens the door to his playroom, stands back for me to pass through, and I am back in the red room of pain. It is the same, the smell of leather, citrus, polish, and dark wood, all very sensual. My blood runs hot and frightened through my system - adrenaline mixed with desire and desire. It is a heady and powerful cocktail. Grayson's stance has completely changed, subtly altered, tougher, and meaner. He looks at me and his eyes are heated, lustful... hypnotic.

'When you're here, you're completely mine,' he hisses, each word slow and measured. 'To do as I see fit. Do you understand?'

His gaze is so intense. I nod, my mouth dry, my heart pounding for a way out of my chest.

'Take off your shoes,' he orders softly.

I swallow, and awkwardly, I take them. He leans, picks them up, and places them next to the door...

Do not hesitate when I ask you to do something. Now I am going to take you off that dress. Something I wanted to do for a few days if I remember correctly. I want you to be comfortable with your body, Naddalin. You have a beautiful body and I love to watch it.

It is a joy to see. I could watch you all day, and I want you unashamedly and unashamed of your nudity. Do you understand? '

'Yes.'

'Yeah, what?' He leans over me, staring.

'Yes sir.'

'Do you mean that?' He snaps.

'Yes sir.'

'Good. Lift your arms above your head.'

I do as instructed, and he bends down and grabs the hem. Slowly, he lifts my dress over my thighs, hips, stomach, breasts, shoulders, and above my head. He stands again to examine me and absently folds my dress, not taking his eyes off me.

He places it on the big chest next to the door. Able to reach, he pulls on my chin, his touch drying me out.

'Bite your lip,' he hisses. 'You know what it does to me,' he adds darkly.
'Turn around.'

I turn around immediately, without hesitation. He unfastened my bra then took the two straps, pulled them slowly down my arms, rubbing my skin with his fingers and the tips of his miniatures as he slid my bra down. His touch makes my spine shiver, awakening every nerve ending in my body. He is standing behind me, so close that I feel the heat radiating from him, warming me, warming me all over. He pulls my hair so that everything hangs behind my back, grabs a handful of it at the back of my neck, and angels my head to one side. He runs his nose down my exposed neck, inhaling completely, then up to my ear. The muscles of my stomach contract, carnal and eager. Hell, he barely touched me, and I want to.

'You still smell so divine, Naddalin,' he whispered, placing a soft kiss under my ear.

I moan.

'Calm,' he breathes. 'Do not make noise.'

Pulling my hair behind me, to my surprise, he begins to braid it into a large braid, his fingers quick and dexterous. He ties him up with an invisible tie when he has done and pulls him quickly so I am forced to come back against him.

'I love your braided hair here,' he whispers.

Hmm... For what?

He lets go of my hair.

'Turn around,' he orders.

I do what I want, my shallow breathing, fear, and desire blend together. It is an intoxicating mixture.

'When I tell you to come here, that is how you dress. Just in panties. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Yes what?' He looks at me.

'Yes sir.'

A hint of a smile lifts the corner of his mouth.

'Good girl.' His eyes burn in mine. 'When I tell you to come here, I expect you to kneel there.' He points to a place next to the door. 'Do it now.'

I blink- as I process his words, turn, and kneel awkwardly as directed.

'You can sit on your heels.'

I sit.

'Place your hands and forearms flat on your thighs. Good. Now separate your knees.'

'Wider. Wider. Perfect. Look at the ground.'

He walks up to me and I can see his feet and shins in my line of sight. Barefoot.

I should take some notes if he wants me to remember them. He leans in and grabs my braid again, then pulls my head back so that I look at him. It just is not painful.

'Will you remember that position, Naddalin?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good. Stay here, do not move.' He leaves the room.

I am on my knees, I wait. Where did he go? What will he do to me? I have no idea how long he leaves me like this... a few minutes, five, ten My breathing becomes shallower, anticipation devours me from within.

-And-

Suddenly he is back - and all at the same time I am calmer and more excited in the same breath. Could I be more excited, I can see his feet. He changed his jeans. These are older, torn, soft, and over-washed. Holy cow. These jeans are hot. He closes the door and hangs something in the back.

'Good girl, Naddalin. You look lovely like that. Wonderful job. Get up.'

I get up, but I keep my face down.

'You can look at me.'

I look at him, and he looks at me intently, assessing, but his eyes soften. He took off his shirt. Oh my... I want to touch it. The button on the top of his jeans is undone.

'I am going to chain you now, Naddalin. Give me your right hand.'

I give him my hand. He turns it palm up, and before I know it, he smashes the center with a whip I had not noticed in his right hand. It happens so quickly that the surprise barely registers. Even more amazing - it does not hurt. Well, not a lot, just a slight prick.

'What does it do?' he asks.

I blink at him, confused.

'Answer me now.'

'Okay.' I frown.

'Don't frown.'

I blink and try to be unmoved. I succeed.

'Does it hurt?

'No.'

'It is not going to hurt. Do you understand?'

'Yes.' My voice is uncertain. Isn't that going to hurt?

'I think so,' he said.

Jeez, my breathing is so shallow. Does he know what I am thinking? He shows me the harvest. It is brown braided leather. My eyes are raised to meet hers, and they are lit with fire and a hint of amusement.

'We want to please, Miss Black,' he whispers. 'Come.' He takes my elbow and moves me under the gate. He reaches out and unhooks a few chains with black leather cuffs. 'This grid is designed for the chains to move through the grid.'

I look up. Holy shit - it is like a subway map.

'We're going to start here, but I want to fuck you on your feet. Then we will end up at the wall over there.' He shows with the whip where the large wooden X is on the wall.

'Put your hands above your head.'

I immediately force it, feeling like I am stepping out of my body - a casual observer of events unfolding around me. It is beyond fascinating, beyond the erotic. It is singularly the most exciting and scary thing I have ever done. I confide in a handsome man who, by his admission, makes numerous Shadows of fucked up. I suppress the brief thrill of fear. Maury and Jack, they know I am here.

He stands close as he ties the wrists. I look at his chest. Its proximity is heavenly. He smells of shower gel and Grayson, an intoxicating mixture, and it brings me back to the present. I want to run my nose and my tongue through this handful of chest hair.

I might just lean forward...

He pulls back and looks at me, his hooded, salacious, carnal expression, and I am helpless with my hands tied, but just looking at his pretty face, reading his urge and languishing, I can feel the wetness between my legs. He walks slowly around me.

'You look very well tied up like that, Miss Black. And your smart, calm mouth for the moment. I like it.'

Standing in front of me again, he hooks his fingers into my panties, and at a very calm pace, peels them down my legs, slowly undressing me excruciatingly, so that he ends up kneeling in front of me. Keeping his eyes on mine, he rubs my panties

in his hand, holds them to his nose, and inhales deeply. Holy shit. Did he just do that? He smiles nastily at me and puts them in his jeans pocket.

Unrolling from the ground, rising lazily, like a jungle cat, he points the tip of the whip at my navel, quietly rounding it - tempting me. In contact with the leather, I shudder and gasp. He walks around me again, dragging the crop down the middle of my body. On his second home run, he suddenly lashes out, and he hits me under my butt... against my cock. I scream in surprise as all my nerve endings are at attention. I shoot against the detentions. Shock goes through me, and it is the strangest, sweetest hedonistic feeling.

'Calm,' he whispered as he walked around me again, the crop slightly higher in the middle of my body. This time, when he throws it against me in the same place, I wait for him... oh my there. My body is convulsing at the sweet, prickly bite.

As he makes his way around me, he grazes again, this time hitting my nipple, and I throw my head back as my nerve endings sing. He strikes the other... a brief, quick and gentle retribution. My nipples harden and lengthen from the assault, and I moan loudly, tugging at my leather wrists.

'Does it feel good?' he breathes.

'Yes.'

He hits me on the butt again. The harvest stings this time.

'Yes what?'

'Yes, sir,' I moan.

He stops... but I cannot see him anymore. My eyes are closed as I try to absorb the myriad sensations that run through my body. Very slowly, it is raining little biting licks of the crop down my stomach, heading south. I know where this leads, and I am trying to get my psyche on - but when he hits my clit, I scream.

'Oh please!' I moan.

'Silence,' he orders, and he hits me on the butt again.

I did not expect it to be like this... I am lost. Lost in a sea of sensations. And suddenly, he drags the crop against my cock, through my pubic hair, to the entrance of my vagina.

'Look how wet you are for this, Naddalin. Open your eyes and mouth.

I do as I am told, completely seduced. It pushes the tip of the crop into my mouth, like my dream. Holy shit.

'See how you taste. Suck. Suck hard, baby.'

My mouth closes around the crop as my eyes focus on his. I can taste the rich leather and the salty taste of my excitement. His eyes are blazing. He is in his element.

He removes the tip of my mouth, and he stands forward and grabs me and kisses me hard, his tongue invading my mouth. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls me against him. His chest crushes mine, and I want to touch, but I cannot, my hands, useless above me.

'Oh, Naddalin, you taste very good,' he hisses. 'Shall I bring you over?'

'Please,' I beg you.

The crop bites my buttock. Oh!

'Please what?'

'Please, sir,' I moan.

He smiles at me, triumphant.

'With that?' He is holding the crop so I can see it

'Yes sir.'

'Are you sure?' He looks at me sternly.

'Yes, please, sir.'

'Close your eyes.'

I closed the room, he... the harvest. He starts again with small licks against my stomach. On the way down, soft little licks against my clit, once, twice, three times, over and over, until finally, it is there - I cannot take it anymore - and I arrive, gloriously, loudly, weakly sagging. His arms wrap around me as my legs turn to jelly. I dissolve in his embrace, my head against his chest, and meow and moan as the aftershocks of my orgasm devour me. He lifts me, and suddenly we move, my arms still tied above my head, and I can feel the cool wood of the polished cross on my back, and he pops the buttons on his jeans. He rests me briefly against the cross as he slides over a condom, then his hands wrap around my thighs as he lifts me again.

'Lift your legs, baby, wrap them around me.'

I feel so weak, but I do as he asks by wrapping my legs around his hips and positioning myself under me. Suddenly he is inside me, and I scream again, listening to his muffled moan in my ear. My arms rest on his shoulders as he sinks into me. Jeez, it is deep like that. He pushes repeatedly, his face against my neck, his breathing hard against my throat. I feel the accumulation again. Jeez no... not yet... I do not think my body will withstand another upsetting moment. But I have no choice... and with a fatality that becomes familiar, I let go and come back, and it is sweet, scary, and intense.

I lose all sense of myself. Grayson follows him, screaming his release through clenched teeth and holding me tight and tight as he does.

He quickly comes out of me and leans me against the cross, his body supporting mine. Unbuckle the handcuffs, he frees my hands and we both fall to the ground. He pulls me onto his knees, cradling me, and I lean my head against his chest. If I had the strength, I would touch him, but not me. Later, I realize that he is still wearing his jeans.

'Good job, baby,' he whispers. 'Does it hurt?'

'No,' I breathe. I can barely keep my eyes open. Why am I so tired?

'Did you expect that?' he whispers as he hugs me, his fingers brushing back a few strands of hair that have escaped my face.

'Yes.'

'You see most of your fear is in your head, Naddalin,' he pauses. 'Would you do it again?'

I think for a moment as fatigue clouds my brain... Again?

'Yes.' My voice is so sweet.

He hugs me tightly.

'Good. Me too,' he whispers, then leans in and gently kisses the top of my head. 'And I'm not done with you yet.'

Not finished with me yet. Saint Moses. I cannot do anything more. I am completely exhausted and struggle with an overwhelming urge to sleep. I am leaning against his chest, my eyes closed, and he is wrapped around me - arms and legs - and I feel... safe and so comfortable. Will, he let me sleep, to dream? My mouth tightens at the silly thought, and turning my face into Grayson's chest, I inhale his unique scent and caress it, but immediately it tenses up... Oh shit. I open my eyes and look at him. He looks at me.

'No,' he hisses in a warning.

I blush and gaze at her chest longingly. I want to run my tongue through his hair, kiss him, and for the first time, I notice he has a few random, faint little round scars dotted around his chest. Chickenpox, fairies, I thought distractedly.

'Kneel by the door,' he orders, sitting back, putting his hands on his knees, effectively freeing me. No longer warm, the temperature of his voice dropped several degrees.

I awkwardly stumble to my feet, walk to the door, and kneel as instructed. I am shaking and very, very tired, monumentally confused. Who would have thought that I could have found such satisfaction in this room? Who would have thought it would be so exhausting? My limbs are deliciously heavy, full. My inner goddess does not disturb signs outside his room.

Grayson moves to the periphery of my vision. My eyes are starting to sag.

'Are you bored, am I, Miss Black?'

I jump, and Grayson stands in front of me, his arms crossed looking at me. Oh, shit, caught taking a nap - it is not gonna be good. His eyes soften as I watch him.

'Get up,' he orders.

I carefully climb to my feet. He looks at me and his mouth quivers. 'You are broken, aren't you?' I nod shyly, blushing. 'Endurance, Miss Black.' He narrows his eyes at me. 'I have not had my fill of you yet. Stretch your hands out in front as if you were praying.' I blink at him. Pray! I pray that you will go easy with me. I do what I am told. He takes a cable tie and ties it around my wrists, tightening the plastic. Good heavens. My eyes fly to hers. 'Sounds familiar,' he asks, unable to hide his smile. Damn... the plastic cable ties. Restocking at Eastwood's! Everything becomes clear. I watch him as the adrenaline rushes through my body again. Okay - that caught my attention - I am awake now. 'I have scissors here.' He holds them out so that I can see them. 'I can get you out of this in a moment.'

I try to part my wrists, test my ties, and as I do, the plastic bites into my flesh - it is painful, but if I relax my wrists they are okay - the tie does not cut my skin. 'Come.' He takes my hands and leads me to the four-poster bed. I now notice that it has dark red leaves on it and a shackle on each corner. 'I want more - a lot, a lot more,' he leans in and whispers in my ear. And my heart starts to beat again. Oh, man. 'But I will be quick. You are tired. Hang on to the post,' he said. I frown. Not on the bed, I find I can spread my hands apart as I grab the richly carved wooden pole. 'Lower,' he orders. 'Good. Do not let go. If you do, I will spank you. Understand?' 'Yes sir.' 'Good.' He stands behind me and grabs my hips, then quickly lifts me back so that I lean forward, holding the pole. 'Don't let go, Naddalin,' he warns. 'I am going to fuck you hard from behind. Hold the post to support your weight. Understood?' 'Yes.' He hits me on the bottom with his hand. Ouch... it stings. 'Yes sir,' I mumble quickly. 'Spread your legs.' He puts his leg between mine, and holding my hips, he pushes my right leg to the side. 'It is better. After that, I will let you sleep.' I am panting. I do not think about sleep now. He reaches out and gently strokes my back.

'You have such beautiful skin, Naddalin,' he huffed, leaning down and kissing me along my spine, soft kisses that were light as feathers. At the same time, his hands move to my forehead throbbing my breasts, and as he does, he traps my nipples between his fingers and pulls them gently. I stifle my moan as my whole body responds, relive once more for him. He gently bites and sucks my waist, tugging at my nipples, and my hands tighten around the beautifully sculpted post. His hands drop

and I hear the now familiar tear in the foil, and he pulls off his jeans. 'You have such a captivating and sexy ass, Naddalin Black. What I would love to do about it.' His hands smooth and shape each of my butt cheeks, then his fingers slide down, and he slides two fingers inside of me. 'So wet. You never disappoint, Miss Black,' he whispers, and I hear the wonder in his voice. 'Hold on... it's gonna be quick, baby.' He grabs my hips and positions himself, and I brace myself for his assault. But he reaches out to me and grabs my braid towards the end and wraps it around his wrist up to my neck, holding my head in place. Very slowly, he creeps inside me, pulling my hair at the same time... oh fullness. He gently pulls away from me, and his other hand grabs my hip, holding it tight, then he slams into me, pulling me forward.

'Wait, Naddalin!' he cries through clenched teeth. I grip tighter around the post and push him back against him as he continues his ruthless assault, repeatedly, his fingers digging into my hip. My arms hurt, my legs are uncertain, my scalp hurts from pulling my hair... and I can feel a gathering deep inside me. Oh no... and for the first time, I am afraid of my orgasm... if I come... I will collapse. Grayson continues to move against me, inside me, his breathing hoarse, moaning, moaning. My body reacts... how I feel about the acceleration. But suddenly Grayson comes to a stop, slamming deeply. 'Come on, Naddalin, give it to me,' he moans, and my name on his lips makes me lose my mind as I become the whole body and the spiraling feeling and the sweet and sweet release, then completely and completely. stupid. When the meaning returns, I lie on it. He is on the floor, and I am lying on top of him with my back to him, and I am looking at the ceiling, all post-coitus, say, broken. Oh... the carabiners, I thought absently - I had forgotten those. Grayson rubs my ear. 'Raise your hands,' he said softly. I feel like my arms are lead, but I hold them. He wields the scissors and passes a blade under the plastic. 'I declare this Naddalin open,' he breathes and cuts the plastic. I laugh and rub my wrists as they are released. I can feel his smile. 'It's such a lovely sound,' he said wistfully. He suddenly sits up, taking me with him to sit on his lap again. 'It's my fault,' he said, moving me so he could rub my shoulders and arms. Slowly it massages a bit of life into my limbs. What? I look at him behind me, trying to figure out what he means.

'That you don't laugh more often.' 'I'm not a big laugh,' I mumble sleepily. 'Oh, but when that happens, Miss Black, it's a wonder and a joy to see.' 'Very flowery, Mr. Maury,' I mumble, trying to keep my eyes open. His eyes soften and he smiles. 'I would say you are completely fucked and need some sleep.' 'It wasn't flowery at all,' I growled playfully. He smiles and gently lifts me off him and stands up, gloriously naked.

I momentarily wish I were more awake to appreciate it. Picking up his jeans, he puts them back on, commando. 'I don't want to scare Stephen, or Ms. Jones for that matter,' he mumbles. Hmm... they must know what a perverted bastard he is. The thought worries me. He leans in to help me up and leads me to the door, on the back of which hangs a Maury waffle robe. He patiently dresses me as if I were a little child. I do not have the strength to lift my arms. When I am covered and respectable he leans in and kisses me softly, his mouth twisting into a smile. 'Bed,' he said. Oh... no... 'To sleep,' he adds reassuringly when he sees my expression. Suddenly he picks me up and carries me curled up against his chest to the room along the hall where earlier in the day Dr. Greene examined me. My head falls against his chest. I am exhausted. I do not remember ever having been so tired. Pulling the quilt, he lays me down and, even more surprisingly, climbs up beside me and hugs me. 'Sleep now, beautiful girl,' he whispers and kisses my hair. And before I can make a facetious comment, I sleep.

Soft lips brush my temple, leaving soft tender kisses in their wake, and part of me wants to turn around and respond, but mostly I want to stay asleep. I moan and sink into my pillow.

'Naddalin, wake up. Grayson's voice is soft, coaxing.

'No,' I moan.

'We have to leave in half an hour for dinner with my parents.' He is amused.

I reluctantly open my eyes. It is twilight outside. Grayson is leaning over and looking at me intently.

'Go on with your head asleep. Get up.' He leans in and kisses me again.

'I bought you a drink. I will be downstairs. Do not go back to sleep, or you will be in trouble,' he threatens, but his tone is soft. He kisses me briefly and walks out, letting me blink sleepily in the cold, stark room.

I am refreshed but suddenly nervous. Holy cow, I meet his parents! He just worked me up with a riding crop and tied me up with a cable tie that I sold him, for heaven's sake - and I am going to meet his parents. This will be the first time Maury meets them too - at least she will be there to support him. I roll my shoulders. They are stiff. His requests for a personal trainer do not seem so weird anymore now, in fact, they are mandatory if I am to have any hope of following him.

I slowly climb out of bed and find that my dress hangs outside the closet and my bra is resting on the chair. Where are my panties, I check under the chair. Nothing. Then I remember - he had the squirrel in his jeans pocket. I rinse off the memory, after him, I cannot even bring myself to think about it, he was so - barbaric. I frown. Why didn't he give me back my panties?

I steal into the bathroom, baffled by my lack of underwear. Drying myself off after my pleasant but far too brief shower, I realize that he did it on purpose. He wants me to be embarrassed and ask for my panties, and he will either say yes or no. My inner goddess smiles at me. Hell... two can play this game. Deciding on the spot not to ask him for them and not to give him this satisfaction, I will go to meet his parents without panties. Naddalin Black! My subconscious is berating me, but I do not want to listen to it - I hug in glee because I know it will drive it crazy.

Back in the bedroom, I put on my bra, put on my dress, and climb into my shoes. I take the braid off and brush my hair in a hurry, then look at the drink I have left.

It is pale pink. What is it: cranberries and sparkling water? Hmm... it tastes delicious and quenches my thirst.

Back in the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror: eyes shining, cheeks slightly red, looking slightly smug from my panty plan, and I go downstairs. Fifteen minutes. Not bad, Naddalin.

Grayson is standing by the panoramic window, dressed in the Murray flannel pants that I adore, the ones that hang in this incredibly sexy way on his hips, and of course, a white linen shirt. Doesn't it have other colors? Frank Sinatra sings softly over the surround speakers

Grayson turns and smiles as I enter. He looks at me expectantly.

'Hi,' I say softly, and my sphinx smile meets his.

'Hi,' he said. 'How are you?' Her eyes shine with amusement.

'Good thank you?'

'I feel particularly good, Miss Black.'

He is so waiting for me to say something.

'Frank. I never figured you out for a Sinatra fan.'

He raises his eyebrows at me, his air of speculation.

'Eclectic taste, Miss Black,' he whispers, and he walks towards me like a panther until he is standing in front of me, his gaze so intense it takes my breath away.

Frank starts to sing... an old song, one of Ray's favorites. 'Witchcraft.' Grayson quietly traces his fingers along my cheek, and I can feel it down.

'Dance with me,' he whispers hoarsely.

Taking the remote control out of his pocket, he turns up the volume and holds out his hand to me, his gray eyes full of promise, envy, and humor. He is attractive and I am bewitched. I place my hand in his. He smiles at me lazily and pulls me into his hug, his arms wrapping around my waist, and he begins to sway.

I put my free hand on his shoulder and smiled at him, caught in his contagious, cheerful mood. And he starts to move. Boy, can he dance? We cover the floor, from the window to the kitchen and back, swirling and spinning to the beat of the music. And it allows me to follow it so easily.

We slide around the dining table, towards the piano, and back and forth past the glass wall, New York sparkles outside, a dark and magical mural to our dance, and I cannot help but laugh. carefree. He smiles at me as the song draws to a close.

'There is no nicer witch than you,' he whispers, then kisses me softly. 'Well, that brought some color to your cheeks, Miss Black. Thanks for dancing. Shall we meet my parents?'

'You're welcome, and yes, I can't wait to meet them,' I replied breathlessly.

'Do you have everything you need?

'Oh, yes,' I replied gently.

'Are you sure?'

I nod as casually as possible. I do so under his intense and amused shruti Pittsburgh. His face splits into a huge smile and he shakes his head.

'Okay. If that is how you want to play it, Miss Black.'

He grabs my hand, picks up his jacket from one of the bar stools, and leads me through the lobby to the elevator. Oh, the many faces of Grayson Maury. Can I ever understand this mercurial man?

I watch him in the elevator. He enjoys a private joke, a trace of a smile flirting with his beautiful mouth. I fear it will be at my expense. What was I thinking? I am going to see his parents and I am not wearing any underwear. My subconscious gives me an unnecessary expression that I told you. In the relative safety of his apartment, it seemed like a fun and teasing idea. Now I am outside without panties! He looks at me, and this is the load that rises between us. The amused look disappears from his face and his expression darkens, his eyes dark... oh there.

The elevator doors open on the ground floor. Grayson shakes his head slightly as if to clear his thoughts and motion for me to come out in front of him in the nicest way.

Who is he kidding? He is not a gentleman. He has my panties.

Stephen draws in the big Audi. Grayson opens the back door for me and I climb inside as elegantly as I can, considering my state of undressing gratuitously. I am thankful that Maury's plum dress is so tacky and that it hangs at the top of my knees.

We accelerate the I-5, both quiet, no doubt inhibited by the constant presence of Stephen at the front. Grayson's mood is almost tangible and seems to change, the humor slowly dissipating as we head north. He ruminates, looks out the window, and I can feel him slip away. What is he thinking, I cannot ask him? What can I say in front of Stephen?

'Where did you learn to dance?' I ask shyly. He turns to look at me, his eyes unreadable in the intermittent light of the passing streetlights.

'Do you really want to know?' he answers softly.

My heart sinks, and now I do not because I can guess.

'Yes,' I grudgingly whisper.

'Mrs. MLF stifflers mom loved to dance.'

Oh, my worst suspicions have come true. She taught him well, and the thought depresses me - I cannot teach her anything. I have no specific skills.

'She must have been a good teacher.'

'She was,' he said softly.

My scalp itches. Did she get the best of him? Before it got so closed Or did she pull it out on its own? It has such a fun and playful side to it. I smiled involuntarily as I remembered being in his arms as he spun me around his living room, so unexpected, and he had my panties on somewhere.

-And-

Then there is the Red Room of Pain. I rub my wrists reflexively - thin strips of plastic will do this to a girl. She taught him all that too or ruined him, depending on his point of view. Or he would have found his way there anyway despite Ms. R.

I realize, then, that I hate her. I hope I will never meet her because I will not be responsible for my actions if I do. I do not remember ever feeling this passionately about anyone, especially someone I have never met. Looking out the window blindly, I feed my irrational anger and jealousy.

My mind goes back to the afternoon. Based on what I understand of his preferences, he was easy on me. Would I do it again? I cannot even pretend to argue against it. Of course, I would, if he asked me - if he did not hurt me and if that is the only way to be with him.

This is essential. I want to be with him. My inner goddess sighs in relief. I conclude that she rarely uses her brain to think but another vital part of her anatomy, and now, it is a exposed part.

'No,' he whispers.

I frown and turn to look at him.

'Not what?' I did not touch it.

'Think too much about things, Naddalin.' Reaching out, he grabs my hand, brings it to his lips, and gently kisses my knuckles. 'I had a wonderful afternoon. Thank you.'

-And-

He is back with me. I blink at him and smile shyly. He is so confusing. I am asking a question that bothers me.

'Why did you use a cable tie?'

He smiles at me.

'It is quick, it is easy, and it is something different to feel and experience. I know they are brutal, and I like that in a restraint.' He smiles slightly at me.

'Very effective at keeping you in your place.'

I blushed and glanced nervously at Stephen, who remained unmoved, his eyes riveted on the road. What am I supposed to say that Grayson innocently shrugs.

'It's all part of my world, Naddalin.' He shakes my hand and off we go, looking out the window again.

It is world indeed, and I want to belong to it, but on its terms, I just do not know. He did not mention that damn contract. My inner thoughts do nothing to cheer me up. I look out the window and the scenery has changed. We cross one of the bridges, surrounded by inky darkness. The dark knight reflects my introspective mood, drawing closer, suffocating.

I take a brief coup d' eye in Grayson, and he looks at me.

'Penny for your thoughts?' He asks.

I sigh and frown.

'It's bad, isn't it?'

'I wish I knew what you were thinking.'

He gives me a smirk.

'Ditto, baby,' he says quietly as Stephen rushes into the night towards Bellevue.

It is just before eight o'clock when the Audi enters the driveway of a colonial-style mansion.

It is breathtaking, even to the roses around the door. Perfect picture book.

'Are you ready for this?' Grayson asks as Stephen pulls up to the impressive front door.

I nod, and he gives me another reassuring squeeze.

'First for me too,' he whispers, then smirks nastily. 'I bet you'd like to wear your underwear right now,' he teases.

I rinse. I had forgotten my missing panties. Fortunately, Stephen got out of the car and opened my door so as not to hear our exchange. I frown at Grayson who grins broadly as he turns and exits the car.

Dr. Billie Trevelyan-Maury is on the doorstep waiting for us. She looks elegantly sophisticated in a pale blue silk dress; behind her is Mr. Maury, I presume, tall, blond, and as handsome in his way as Grayson.

'Naddalin, you met my mother, Billie. This is my father, Carrick.

'Mr. Maury, what a pleasure to meet you. I smile and squeeze his outstretched hand.

'The pleasure is mine, Naddalin.'

'Please call me, Naddalin.'

Her blue eyes are soft and gentle.

'Naddalin, it is nice to see you again. Billie envelops me in a warm embrace. 'Come in, my Dear,

'Is she here?' I hear a scream from inside the house. I eyed Grayson nervously.

'It would be Mia, my little sister,' he said almost irritated, but not quite.

There is a flurry of affection in his words, the way his voice becomes softer and his eyes narrow when he mentions her name. Grayson adores him. It is a revelation.

And she rushes down the hall, raven-haired, tall, and curvaceous. She is about my age.

'Naddalin! I have heard so much about you. She hugs me tightly.

Holy Cow. I cannot help but smile at his boundless enthusiasm.

'Naddalin, please,' I whisper as she leads me into the large hallway. These are all dark wood floors and antique rugs with a sweeping staircase leading to the second floor.

'He's never brought a girl home,' Mia said, dark eyes shining with excitement.

I see Grayson rolling his eyes and raising an eyebrow at him. He narrows his eyes at me.

'Mia, calm down,' Billie warns softly. 'Hello, honey,' she said, kissing Grayson on both cheeks. He smiles warmly at her, then shakes his father's hand.

We all turn and walk towards the living room. Mia did not let go of my hand. The bedroom is spacious, tastefully furnished in cream, brown and pale blue tones, comfortable, understated, and very elegant. Maury and Jack are cuddling together on a sofa, hugging champagne flutes. Maury bounces back to kiss me, and Mia finally lets go of my hand.

'Hi, Naddalin!' She is beaming. 'Grayson. She nods her head sharply.

'Maury. He is just as formal with her.'

I frown at their exchange. Jack grabs me in a global embrace. What is it, embrace Naddalin's week? Grayson stands beside me, wrapping his arm around me. Putting his hand on my hip, he extends his fingers and pulls me closer. Everyone is watching us. It is disconcerting.

'Drinks? Mr. Maury appears to have recovered. 'Prosecco?

'Please,' Grayson and I speak in unison.

Oh... this is more than weird. Mia claps her hands.

'You even say the same things. I will get them.' She walks out of the room.

I blush scarlet and seeing Maury sitting with Jack, it suddenly occurs to me that the only reason Grayson has invited me is that Maury is there. Jack freely and happily asked Maury to meet his parents. Grayson was trapped - knowing I would have found out via Maury. I frown at the thought. He was coerced into the invitation. The realization is dark and depressing. My subconscious nods quietly, a look you have finally worked on his face.

'Dinner's almost ready,' Billie said, following Mia out of the room.

Grayson frowns at me.

'Sit down,' he orders, pointing to the plush sofa, and I do as I am told, carefully crossing my legs. He sits next to me but does not touch me.

'We were just talking about vacations, Naddalin,' Mr. Maury said gently. 'Jack decided to follow Maury and his family to Barbados for a week.'

I glance at Maury, and she smiles, her eyes bright and wide. She is happy. Mary Smith, show your dignity!

'Are you taking a break now that you've finished your degree?' Mr. Maury asks.

'I am thinking of going to Georgia for a few days,' I replied.

Grayson looks at me, blinking several times, his expression was unreadable. Oh shit.

I did not tell him about it.

'Georgia?' He whispers.

'My mother lives there, and I have not seen her for a while.'

'When were you thinking of going?' Her voice is low.

'Tomorrow, late at night.'

Mia walks into the living room and hands us champagne flutes filled with pale pink Prosecco.

'Your good health!' Mr. Maury raises his glass. A proper toast from a doctor's husband makes me smile.

'For how long?' Grayson asks, his voice deceptively soft.

Holy shit... he is angry.

'I do not know yet. It will depend on how my interviews go tomorrow.'

His jaw tightens and Maury gets that interfering look on his face. She smiles too sweetly.

'Naddalin deserves a break,' she said pointedly to Grayson. Why is she so antagonistic to him? What is his problem?

'Do you have any interviews?' Mr. Maury asks.

'Yes, for internships with two publishers tomorrow.'

'I wish you good luck.'

'Dinner is on the table,' Billie announces.

We are all standing. Maury and Jack follow Mr. Maury and Mia out of the room. I will follow him, but Grayson squeezes my elbow, stopping abruptly.

'When are you going to tell me you're leaving?' he asks urgently. His tone is gentle, but he hides his anger.

'I'm not leaving, I'm going to see my mother, and I was just thinking about it.'

'What about our arrangement?'

'We don't have an arrangement yet.'

He narrows his eyes, then seems to remember himself. Releasing my hand, he takes my elbow and leads me out of the room.

'This conversation is not over,' he mutters threateningly as we enter the dining room.

Oh, crapola. Do not put your panties in such a twist... and give me back mine. I stare at him.

The dining room reminds me of our private dinner at the Heathman. A crystal chandelier hangs above the dark wood table and there is a massive, richly carved mirror on the wall. The table is set and covered with a crisp white linen tablecloth, a bowl of pale pink peonies as the centerpiece. That is wonderful.

We take our places. Mr. Maury is at the head of the table, while I sit to his right, and Grayson is seated next to me. Mr. Maury takes the opened bottle of red wine and offers it to Maury. Mia takes a seat next to Grayson, and grabs his hand, squeezes it tightly. Grayson smiled warmly at him.

'Where did you meet, Naddalin?' Mia asks him.

'She interviewed me for the OVHS student magazine.'

'What Maury is changing,' I add, hoping to take the conversation away from me.

Mia beams at Maury, sitting opposite Jack, and they start talking about the student magazine.

'Wine, Naddalin?' Mr. Maury asks.

'Please.' I smile at him. Mr. Maury gets up to fill the rest of the glasses.

I glance at Grayson, and he turns to look at me, his head tilted to the side.

'What?' He asks.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

'I'm not mad at you.'

I am watching him. He sighs.

'Yes, I am angry with you.' He briefly closes his eyes.

'Crazy palm-thrill?' I ask nervously.

'What are you both whispering about?' Maury intervenes.

I blush, and Grayson stares at her from a Smith's kind of butt - even Maury fades under his gaze.

'About my trip to Georgia,' I said quietly, hoping to dispel their mutual hostility.

Maury smiled, a nasty glint in his eyes.

'How was Sam when you went to the bar with him on Friday?'

Holy shit, Maury. I widen my eyes on her. What is she doing? Her eyes widen at me and I realize she is trying to make Grayson jealous. How little she knows. I thought I would get away with this.

'He was fine,' I whisper.

Grayson leans in.

'Crazy palm-thrill,' he whispers. 'Especially now.' His tone is calm and deadly.

Oh no. I squirm.

Billie reappears carrying two plates, followed by a young woman with blond braids, elegantly dressed in pale blue, carrying a tray of plates. His eyes immediately find Grayson in the room. She blushes and looks at him under her long mascara lashes.

What!

Somewhere in the house, the phone starts ringing.

'Excuse me,' Mr. Maury stands up again and leaves.

'Thanks, Gretchen,' Billie said softly, frowning as Mr. Maury stepped out. 'Just leave the tray on the console.' Gretchen nods, and with another furtive glance at Grayson, she leaves.

So the Maury's are staffed, and the staff is eyeing my dominant potential. Can tonight get worse? I frown on my hands on my knees.

Mr. Maury is coming back.

'Call for you, honey. This is the hospital,' he told Billie.

'Please start, everyone.' Billie smiles as she hands me a plate and leaves.

It smells delicious - chorizo and scallops with roasted red peppers and shallots, sprinkled with flat-leaf parsley. And despite my stomach spinning from Grayson's veiled threats, the sneaky looks of cute little Miss Pigtales, and the mess of my missing underwear, I am starving. I blush when I realize that it was the physical effort of this afternoon that gave me such an appetite.

Moments later, Billie returns, her brow furrowed. Mr. Maury tilts his head to one side... I love Grayson. 'Everything is fine?' 'Another case of measles,' Billie sighs. 'Oh no.' 'Yes, a child. The fourth case this month. If only people could get their children immunized.' She shakes her head sadly, then smiles. 'I am so glad our kids have never experienced this. They have never caught anything worse than chicken pox, thank goodness. Poor Jack,' she said as she sat down, smiling indulgently at her son. Jack frowns and squirms uncomfortably. 'Grayson and Mia were lucky. They had it so nicely, only a place to share between them.' Mia laughs and Grayson rolls his eyes. 'So, did you catch the Mariners game, daddy?' Jack is keen to move the conversation forward. The appetizers are delicious and I focus on the meals while Jack, Mr. Maury, and Grayson talk about baseball. Grayson appears relaxed and calm as he talks to his family.

My mind is working furiously. Damn Maury, what game is she playing, is he going to punish me, I curse at the thought. I have not yet signed this contract. I will not. I will stay in Georgia where he cannot reach me. 'How are you settling into your new apartment my Dear,' Billie asks politely. I am grateful for his question, which distracts me from my discordant thoughts, and I tell him about our move. As we finish our entries, Gretchen appears, and not for the first time, I wish I could have freely put my hands on Grayson just to let him know - he has maybe numerous Shadows of screwed up, but he is. to me. She proceeds to clear the table, rubbing a little too close to Grayson for my liking. Fortunately, he seems oblivious to her, but my inner goddess is on fire and not in an effective way. Maury and Mia are lyrical about Paris.

'Have you been to Paris, Naddalin?' Mia innocently asks, distracting me from my jealous reverie. 'No, but I would love to go.' I know I am the only one at the table who has never left the continental United States. 'We spent our honeymoon in Paris.' Billie smiled at Mr. Maury who smiled back at her.

It is almost embarrassing to be a witness. They love each other deeply, and I wonder for a moment what it must be like to grow up with both parents in situ. 'It's a beautiful city,' Mia admits. 'Despite the Parisians. Grayson, you should take Naddalin to Paris,' Mia says firmly. 'I think Naddalin would prefer London,' Grayson said softly. Oh... he remembered. He puts his hand on my knee - his fingers move up to my thigh. My whole body tightens in response. No... not here, not now. I blush and move, trying to get away from him. His hand tightens on my thigh, immobilizing me.

I am looking for my wine, in desperation. Little Miss European Pigtails returns, all shy looks and swaying hips, with our in-tree, a Beef Wellington, I believe. Fortunately, she gives us our plates and then leaves, although she lingers to hand here is to Grayson. He looks at me questioningly as I watch her close the dining-room door. 'So what was wrong with the Parisians?' Jack asks his sister. 'Haven't they adopted your attractive ways?' 'Ugh, no they did not. And Mr. Floubert, the ogre I worked for, was such a bossy tyrant.' I stammer in my wine.

'Naddalin, are you okay?' Grayson asks solicitously, removing his hand from my thigh. The humor returned to his voice. Oh, thank you, my God. When I nod, he gently pats me on the back and does not remove his hand until he knows I have recovered. The beef is delicious and served with roasted sweet potatoes, carrots, parsnips, and green beans. It is even more palatable since Grayson I get it done to keep his mood up for the rest of the meal. I suspect it is because I eat so well. Conversation flows freely among the warm and caring Maury's, gently teasing each other. During our lemon syllabub dessert, Mia regales us with her exploits in Paris, falling at one point in fluent French. We all stare at her, and she looks at him puzzled until Grayson tells her in equally fluent French what she did, whereupon she bursts into a burst of laughter.

She has a very infectious laugh and soon we are all in the stitches. Jack talks about his latest construction project, a new green community in upstate New York. I look at Maury, and she clings to every word Jack says, her eyes shining with desire or love. I have not figured out which one yet. He smiles at her and it is as if an unspoken promise is passing between them. see yes, baby, he says, and it is hot, creepy. I blush just looking at them. I sigh and glance at numerous Shadows. He is so beautiful, I could watch him forever. He has a slight stubble on his chin, and my fingers itch to scratch it and feel it against my face, against my breasts... between my thighs. I blush in the sense of my thoughts. He looks at me and raises his hand to pull on my chin. 'Don't bite your lip,' he whispers hoarsely.

'I want to do that.' Billie and Mia clear our dessert glasses and head to the kitchen, while Mr. Maury, Maury, and Jack discuss the merits of solar panels in Washington state. Grayson, pretending to be interested in their conversation, rests his hand on my knee again and his fingers move up to my thigh. My breathing stops and I press my thighs together to stop its progress. I can see him smirking. 'Shall I show you around the estate?' he asks me quite openly. I know I am supposed to say yes, but I do not trust him. Before I can answer though, he is standing and holding out his hand to me.

I place my hand in his and feel all the muscles tighten deep in my stomach, responding to his dark, hungry gray gaze. 'Excuse me,' I say to Mr. Maury, and am Grayson out of the dining room. He leads me through the hallway and into the kitchen where Mia and Billie are stacking the dishwasher. European braids are nowhere to be found. 'I'm going to show Naddalin the backyard,' Grayson said innocently to his mother. She waves to us with a smile as Mia returns to the dining room. We step out onto a Murray slab patio lit by lights embedded in the slabs. There are shrubs in the Murray Stone tubs and a chic metal table and chairs set in a corner. Grayson walks past these, climbs a few steps, and onto a wide lawn that leads to the bay... oh my - it is beautiful.

New York City sparkles on the horizon, and the cool, bright May Moon traces a sparkling silver path across the water to a jetty where two boats are moored. Next to the pier is a boathouse. It is so picturesque, so peaceful. I stood there speechless for a while. Grayson pulls me behind him and my heels dig into the soft grass. 'Stop Please.' I stumble in its wake. He stops and looks at me, his expression unfathomable. 'My heels. I must take off my shoes.' 'Don't bother,' he says, and leans in and takes me over his shoulder. I cry out in shocked surprise, and he gives me a hissing slap on my butt. 'Keep your voice low,' he growls. Oh no... that is not good, my subconscious is shaking at the knees. He is crazy about something - could be Sam, Georgia, no panties, biting my lip.

Damn, he is easy to piss off. 'Where are we going?' I breathe. 'Boathouse,' he snaps. I cling to his hips as I am knocked back, and he deliberately walks in the moonlight across the lawn. 'Why?' I look breathless, bouncing off that shoulder. 'I need to be alone with you.' 'Why?' 'Because I'm going to spank you and then fuck you.' 'Why?' I moan softly. 'You know why,' he hisses. 'I thought you were a guy of the moment?' I beg breathlessly. 'Naddalin, I'm in the moment, trust me.' Holy shit.

Grayson bursts in through the wooden door to the boathouse and stops to turn on some lights. Fluorescent lights flash and buzz in sequence as a harsh white light floods the large wooden building. From my upside-down view, I can see an impressive motorized launch pad in the dock floating gently over the dark water, but I only get a brief glimpse before it whiskers me up the stairs. wood to the room above.

He stops at the door and touches another switch - halogens this time, they are softer, on a dimmer - and we are in an attic room with sloping ceilings. It is decorated with a New England nautical theme: navy blue and cream with a touch of red. The furniture is sparse, just a few sofas are all I can see.

Grayson sets me down on the floor. I do not have time to examine my surroundings - my eyes cannot take my eyes off it. I am fascinated... watching it as one would observe a rare and dangerous predator, waiting for it to strike. His breathing is hard, but he just carried me across the lawn and up a staircase. Gray eyes shine with anger, need, and pure lust.

Holy shit fuck. I could spontaneously burn from his gaze alone.

'Please don't hit me,' I whisper pleadingly.

His brow furrows, his eyes widen. He blinks twice.

'I don't want you to spank me here or now.' Please do not.

Her mouth opens slightly in surprise, and beyond courage, I reach out and run my fingers down her cheek, along the edge of her paws, to the stubble on her chin.

It is a curious mixture of sweet and spicy. Slowly closing his eyes, he leans his face against my touch, and his breath hangs in his throat. Reaching out with my other hand, I run my fingers through her hair. I love her hair. His soft moan is barely audible, and when he opens his eyes his gaze is - suspicious as if he does not understand what I am doing.

Stepping forward so I am against him, I pull gently on his hair, bringing his mouth to mine, and kiss him, forcing my tongue between his lips and into his mouth. He moans and his arms kiss me, pulling me towards him. His hands work their way through my hair and he kisses me back, hard and possessive. Her tongue and my tongue twist and turn together, devouring each other. It tastes divine.

He abruptly pulls back, our collective breathing torn and mingled. My hands fall on his arms and he looks at me.

'What are you doing to me?' he whispers confused.

'Kiss you.'

'You said no.'

'What?' No to what?

'At the table, with your legs.'

Oh... that is what it is.

'But we were at your parents' dining table.' I look at him, completely puzzled.

'No one has ever said no to me before. And it is so hot.'

Her eyes widen slightly, filled with wonder and desire. It is an intoxicating mixture. I instinctively swallow. His hand goes down to my behind. He pulls me sharply against him, and I can feel his erection.

Oh my...

'Are you crazy and excited because I said no?' I breathe, amazed.

'I'm angry because you never mentioned Georgia to me.' I am angry because you went drinking with this guy who tried to seduce you when you were drunk and who left you when you were sick with an almost stranger. What kind of friend does that? And I am crazy and excited because you closed my legs. 'His eyes shine dangerously and he gently pulls up the hem of my dress.'

'I want you, and I want you now. And if you do not let me spank you - which you deserve - I am going to fuck you on the couch this minute, quickly, for my pleasure, not yours.'

My dress barely covers my bare bottom. He suddenly moves so that his hand cupped my cock, and one of his fingers slowly digs into me. His other arm holds me firmly in place around my waist. I suppress my moan.

'It's mine,' he mutters aggressively. 'All mine. Do you understand?' He puts his finger in and out while looking at me, measuring my reaction, his eyes burning.

'Yes, yours,' I breathe as my lust, hot and heavy, rises through my bloodstream, affecting... everything. My nerve endings, my breathing, my heart pounding, trying to leave my chest, the blood swirling in my ears.

-Then-

Suddenly he moves, doing several things at once. Withdrawing his fingers, letting me want, opening his fly, and pushing me onto the couch so that he lies on top of me.

'Hands on my head,' he orders through clenched teeth as he kneels, forcing my legs to widen and reaching for the inside pocket of his jacket. He pulls out a package of foil, looking at me, his expression dark, before removing his jacket so that it falls to the floor. He rolls the condom over its impressive length.

I place my hands on my head and I know it is so as not to touch it. I am so excited.

I can feel my hips already moving to meet him - wanting him in me, like that - rough and hard. Oh... the anticipation.

'We do not have long. It will be quick, and it is for me, not for you. Do you understand?

Do not come, or I will spank you,' he said, gritting his teeth.

Holy shit... how can I stop?

Suddenly he is completely inside of me. I moan loudly, throatily, and revel in the fullness of his possession. He puts his hands on mine above my head, his elbows support my arms outward and down, and his legs prick me. I am trapped. It is everywhere, overwhelms me, almost suffocates. But it is also heavenly, it is my power, it is what I do to it, and it is a hedonistic and triumphant feeling. He is moving fast and furiously inside me, his breathing rough in my ear, and my body reacts, melting around him. I must not come. No, But I meet it push for push, a perfect counterpoint. Abruptly, and too soon, he sinks into me and comes to a stop when he finds his release, the air hissing between his teeth.

He relaxes momentarily, so I can feel him whole, a delicious weight on me. I am not ready to let him go, my body thirsts for relief, but it is so heavy, and at this point, I can not push it against it. suddenly it pulls out, leaving me sore and hungry for more. He looks at me.

'Don't touch yourself. I want you to be frustrated. That is what you do to me by not talking to me, denying me what's mine.' His eyes shine again, angry.

I nod, panting. He gets up and removes the condom, knots it at the end, and puts it in his pants pocket. I watch him, my breathing still irregular, and involuntarily squeeze my thighs together, trying to find some relief. Grayson lifts his fly and runs a hand through his hair as he bends down to retrieve his jacket. He turns to look at me, his expression was softer.

'We better get home.'

I sit down, a little unsteady, dizzy.

'Here. You can put them.'

From his inside pocket, he takes out my panties. I do not smile as I take them from him, but inside I know - I took the punishment, but I won a small victory over the panties. My inner goddess nods in agreement, a satisfied smile on her face - you did not have to ask for them.

'Grayson! Mia screams from the ground below.

He turns and raises his eyebrows at me.

'Right on time. Lord, she can be really irritating.'

I knock her eyebrows back, hastily put my panties back in their proper place, and hold myself with as much dignity as I can muster in my just fucked state. Quickly, I try to straighten my just kissed hair.

'Up there, Mia,' he calls. 'Well, Miss Black, I feel better about it - but I still want to spank you,' he said softly.

'I don't think I deserve it, Mr. Maury, especially after tolerating your unprovoked attack.'

'Without provocation, you kissed me.' He does his best to look hurt.

I tighten my lips.

'He was attacked as the best form of defense.'

'Defense against what?'

'You and your trembling palm.'

He tilts his head to the side and smiles at me as Mia walks up the stairs.

'But was it tolerable?' he asks softly.

I rinse.

'Barely,' I whisper, but I cannot help but smile.

'Oh, there you are.' She shines on us.

'I was showing Naddalin.' Grayson holds out his hand to me, his gray eyes intense.

I put my hand in his and he squeezes it gently.

'Maury and Jack are about to leave. Can you believe these two cannot hold hands? Mia feigns disgust and looks at me from Grayson. 'What have you been doing here?'

Damn, she is forward. I blush scarlet.

'Showing Naddalin my rowing trophies,' Grayson said without missing a beat, completely turned to poker. 'Let's go say goodbye to Maury and Jack.'

Rowing trophies He pulls me gently in front of him, and as Mia turns around he hits me on the butt. I gasp in surprise.

'I'll do it again, Naddalin, and soon,' he threatens quietly near my ear, then hugs me, my back against him, and kisses my hair.

Back home, Maury and Jack bid farewell to Billie and Mr. Maury. Maury hugs me tightly.

'I need to tell you about Grayson's annoyance,' I hiss softly in her ear as she kisses me.

'He needs to be upset, so you can see what he really looks like. Be careful, Naddalin - he is in control so much,' she whispered. 'See you later.'

I KNOW WHAT IT HAS - YOU DON'T! - I am yelling at him in my head.

I am fully aware that her actions are coming from a good place, but sometimes she just goes off target, and right now she is neighboring. I scowl at her and she sticks her tongue out at me, making me smile reluctantly. Playful Maury is new and must be Jack's influence. We wave to them at the door and Grayson turns to me.

'We should go too - you have interviews tomorrow.'

Mia hugs me warmly as we say goodbye.

'We never thought he would find someone!' it gushes out.

I blush and Grayson rolls his eyes again. I tighten my lips. Why can he do this when I cannot? I want to roll my eyes on him, but I dare not, not after his threat in the boathouse.

'Take care of yourself, Naddalin, honey,' Billie said gently

Grayson, embarrassed or frustrated at the generous attention I receive from the remaining Maury's, grabs my hand, and pulls me to his side.

'Don't frighten her or spoil her with too much affection,' he growls.

'Grayson, stop teasing.' Billie scolds him indulgently, her eyes shining with love and affection for him.

Somehow, I do not think he is teasing. I surreptitiously watch their interaction. Billie adores her with the unconditional love of a mother. He leans in and kisses her stiffly.

'Mom,' he says, and there is an undercurrent in his voice - reverence maybe?

'Mr. Maury - bye and thank you.' I reach out to him, and he hugs me too!

'Please call me Carrick. I hope we will see you again very soon, Naddalin.'

Our farewells have been said, Grayson drives me to the car where Stephen is waiting. Did he wait here the whole time for Stephen to open my door, and I slipped into the back of the Audi.

I feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders. What a fucking day. I am exhausted, physically, and emotionally. After a brief conversation with Stephen, Grayson climbs into the car next to me. He turns to face me.

'Well my family loves you too,' he whispers.

The depressing thought of how I came to be invited spontaneously arises and is very intrusive in my head. Stephen starts the car and walks away from the circle of light in the driveway towards the darkness of the road. I look at Grayson and he looks at me.

'What?' he asks, his voice calm.

I flounder momentarily. No, I will tell him. He always complains that I do not talk to him.

'You felt trapped in leading me to meet your parents.' My voice is soft and hesitant. 'If Jack hadn't asked Maury, you never would have asked me.' I cannot see his face in the dark, but he tilts his head open-mouthed at me.

'Naddalin, I am glad you met my parents. Why are you so full of doubt? It never ceases to amaze me. You are such a strong and empowered young woman, but you have such negative thoughts about If I had not wanted you to meet them, you would not be here. Is that how you felt the whole time you were there? '

Oh! He wanted me there - and that is a revelation. He does not seem uncomfortable answering me like he would if he were hiding the truth. He seems happy that I am here... a warm glow slowly spreads through my veins. He shakes his head and takes my hand. I look nervously at Stephen.

'Don't worry about Stephen. Talk to me.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'Yes. I was thinking that. And another thing, I only mentioned Georgia because Maury was talking about Barbados - I did not make up my mind.'

'Do you want to go see your mother?'

'Yes.'

He looks at me oddly, like he is having an internal struggle.

'Can I come with you?' he asks finally.

What!?

'Uh... I do not think that is a clever idea.'

'Why not?'

'I was hoping to take a break from it all... intensity to try to think.'

He looks at me.

'Am I too intense?'

I laughed.

'It's the least we can say!'

In the light of the passing streetlights, I see her lips rise.

'Are you kidding me, Miss Black?'

'I wouldn't dare, Mr. Maury,' I reply with serious mockery.

'You dare, and you laugh at me, often.'

'You are quite funny.'

'Funny?'

'Oh yes.'

'funny, strange or funny ha ha?'

'Oh... a lot of both.'

'In which way?'

'I leave it to you to understand that.'

'I don't know if I can find anything around you, Naddalin,' he said Naddalindonically, then continued quietly, 'What do you need to think about in Georgia?'

'Us,' I whisper.

He looks at me, impassive.

'You said you would try,' he whispers.

'I know.'

'Do you have any doubts?'

'Perhaps.'

He moves as if he is uncomfortable.

'Why?'

Holy shit. How did it suddenly become such an intense and meaningful conversation? It happened to me, like an exam for which I am not prepared. What do I say? Because I love you and you see me as a toy. Because I cannot touch you, because I am too scared to show you affection in case you flinch or denigrate me or worse - beat me. What can I say?

I look out the window momentarily. The car returns to the bridge. We are both shrouded in darkness, hiding our thoughts and feelings, but we do not need the night for that.

'Why, Naddalin? Grayson urges me for an answer.

I shrug my shoulders, trapped. I do not want to lose it. Despite all its demands, its need for control, its frightening vices. I have never felt so alive as now. It is a pleasure to be sitting here next to him. He is so unpredictable, sexy, smart, and funny. But his moods... oh - and he wants to hurt me. He says he will think about my reservations, but it still scares me. I close my eyes. What can I say: Deep down, I just want more, more affection, more playful Grayson, more... love.

He shakes my hand.

'Talk to me, Naddalin. I do not want to lose you. Last week...' He pauses.

We are approaching the end of the bridge, and the road is again bathed in the neon light from the streetlamps, so his face is intermittently in light and dark. And that is such a fitting metaphor. This man, whom I once considered a romantic hero - a brave shining white knight, or the dark knight as he put it. He is not a hero, he is a man with serious and deep emotional flaws, and he is dragging me into the dark. Can't I guide him into the light?

'I want more,' I whisper.

'I know,' he said. 'I'll try.'

I blink at him, and he lets go of my hand and pulls on my chin, freeing my trapped lip.

'For you, Naddalin, I'll try.' He radiates sincerity.

And that is my signal. I unbuckle my belt, reach out and climb onto his knees, taking him completely by surprise. Wrapping my arms around his head, I kiss him, long and hard, and in a nanosecond, he responds.

'Stay with me tonight,' he hisses. 'If you go, I will not see you all week. Please.'

'Yes, I accept. 'And I will try too. I will sign your contract.' And it is an impulsive decision of the moment.

He looks at me.

'Sign after Georgia. Think about it. Think about it, baby.'

'I go.' And we sit in silence for a mile or two.

'You should really be wearing your seatbelt,' Grayson whispers disapprovingly through my hair, but he does not move to move me off his knees.

I snuggled up to him, eyes closed, nose to his throat, sipping his sexy Grayson-and-spicy-musky shower gel scent, my head on his shoulder. I let my mind drift and allow myself to fantasize that he loves me. Oh, and it is so real, almost tangible, and a small part of my embarrassing evil harpy is acting completely out of character and daring to hope. I am careful not to touch his chest but to snuggle into his arms as he holds me tight.

Too soon, I am torn from my impossible daydream.

'We're home,' Grayson whispers, and it is such a tantalizing phrase, full of so much potential.

At home, with Grayson. Except that his apartment is an art gallery, not a house.

Stephen opens the door for us, and I thank him shyly, aware that he has been within earshot of our conversation, but his gentle smile is reassuring and reveals nothing. After getting out of the car, Grayson takes a critical look at me. Oh no... what have I done now?

'Why don't you have a jacket?' he frowns, shrugging his shoulders and draping it over my shoulders.

Relief swept over me.

'It's in my new car,' I replied sleepily, yawning.

He gives me a smirk.

'Tired, Miss Black?

'Yes, Mr. Maury. I feel shy under his mocking examination. Nonetheless, exploration is in order, 'I was convinced in a way that I never thought possible today.'

'Well, if you're really unlucky, maybe I could win some more,' he promises, taking my hand and leading me into the building. Holy shit... Again?

I watch him in the elevator. I assumed he would like me to sleep with him, then I remember that he does not sleep with anyone, although he has him with me a few times.

I frown and suddenly his gaze darkens. He reaches out and grabs my chin, freeing my lip from the teeth.

'Someday- I'm going to fuck you in that elevator, Naddalin, but right now you're tired - so I think we should stick to a bed.'

Leaning down, he clenches his teeth around my lower lip and pulls gently. I melt against him and my breathing stops as my insides unfurl with envy. I reciprocate,

clip my teeth to his upper lip, tease him and he moans. When the elevator doors open, he grabs my hand and pulls me into the lobby, through the double doors, and down the hall.

'Do you need a drink or anything?'

'No.'

'Good. Let us go to bed.'

I raise my eyebrows at him.

'Are you going to settle for plain old vanilla?'

He tilts his head to one side.

'Nothing simple or old about vanilla - it's a very intriguing flavor,' he hisses.

'Since when?'

'Since, last Saturday. Why were you hoping for something more exotic?'

My inner goddess makes her head appear above the parapet.

'Oh no. I had enough exoticism for a day.' My inner goddess pouted at me, failing miserably to hide her disappointment.

'Of course, we cater for all tastes here - at least thirty-one flavors.' He smiles at me lasciviously.

'I noticed,' I replied dryly.

He shakes his head.

'Come on, Miss Black, you have a wonderful day tomorrow. The sooner you are in bed, the sooner you will be fucked, and the sooner you can sleep.'

'Mr. Maury, you are a born romantic.'

'Miss Black, you have a smart mouth. I may have to master it somehow. Come on.' He leads me down the hall to his bedroom and closes the door.

'Hands up,' he orders.

I oblige, and in a movement breathtakingly quick, he removes my robe like a magician, grabbing it by the hem and pulling it gently and quickly over my head.

'Ta-Da! he said playfully.

I laugh and applaud politely. He bows Billie fully, smiling. How can I resist him when he is like this? He puts my dress on the lonely chair next to his dresser.

'What about your next turn?' I invite him, teasing.

'Oh my Dear, Miss Black. Get in my bed,' he growled. 'And I'll show you.'

'Do you think for once- I would have to play hard to get it?' I ask coquettishly.

Her eyes widen in surprise and I see a flicker of excitement.

'Well... the door is closed. I do not know how you are going to avoid me,' he said Naddalindonically. 'I think it's a done deal.'

'But I am a good negotiator.'

'So, I am.' He looks at me, but as he does, his expression changes, confusion invades him and the atmosphere in the room abruptly changes, tensing. 'Don't you want to fuck?' he asks.

'No,' I breathe.

'Oh.' He frowns.

Okay, there you go... deep breathing.

'I want you to make love to me.'

He stops and looks at me blankly. His expression darkens. Oh shit, that does not look good. Give it a minute! My subconscious slams.

'Naddalin, I...' He runs his hands through her hair. Two hands. Jeez, he is baffled.

'I thought we did it?' He said finally.

'I want to touch you.'

He involuntarily pulls back from me, his expression scared for a moment, then he makes her reign.

'Please,' I whisper.

He recovers himself.

'Oh, no Miss Black, you have had enough concessions from me tonight. And I am saying no.'

'No?'

'No.'

Oh... I cannot argue with this... can I?

'Look, you are tired, I am tired. Let us go to bed,' he said looking at me intently.

'So, is touching a difficult limit for you?'

'Yes. This is old news.'

'Please tell me why.'

'Oh, Naddalin, please. Just leave him for now,' he mumbles exasperatedly.

'It's important to me.'

Again, he runs both hands through his hair and takes an oath through his beard.

Turning on his heels, he walks over to the dresser, pulls out a t-shirt, and throws it at me. I grab it, puzzled.

'Put that on and go to bed,' he snaps irritably.

I frown but decide to please him. Turning my back, I quickly remove my bra, pulling on the t-shirt as quickly as possible to cover my nakedness. I leave my panties on, I have not worn them most of the evening.

'I need the bathroom.' My voice is a whisper.

He frowns, puzzled.

'Now are you asking for permission?'

'Uh no.'

'Naddalin, you know where the bathroom is. Today, at this point in our strange arrangement, you do not need my permission to use it. He cannot hide his irritation. He shrugs his shirt off and I rush into the bathroom.

I look at myself in the exceptionally large mirror, shocked to still see the same thing. After everything I have done today, it is still the same regular girl looking at me. What did you expect - that you would grow horns and a little pointy tail? My subconscious slams me down. And what are you doing? Touching is its hard limit. Too soon, silly, he needs to walk before he can run. My subconscious is furious, like a jellyfish in its anger, hair flying, its hands clasped around his face like Edvard Munch's cry. I do not know, but it will not go back into its box. You drive him crazy - think about everything he said, everything he conceded. I frown at my reflection. I need to be able to show him affection - so maybe he can return the favor.

I shake my resigned head and grab Grayson's toothbrush. My subconscious is of course right. I rushed him. He is not ready and neither am I. We are balanced on the delicate swing, this is our odd arrangement - for different purposes, hesitant, and it rocks and swings between us. We both need to get closer to the middle. I just hope none of us fall for our attempt to do so. It is all so fast. I need some distance. Georgia looks more attractive than ever. As I start to brush my teeth, he knocks.

'Come in,' I stammer through a sip of toothpaste.

Grayson stands in the doorway, his pajamas hanging from his hips - this way every little cell in my body rises and takes note. He is shirtless, and I drink him like I am crazed with thirst and clear, fresh mountain spring water. He looks at me impassively, then smiles and comes to stand next to me. Our eyes lock in the mirror, from gray to blue. I finish with his toothbrush, rinse it, and hand it to him, my gaze never leaving hers. Without a word, he takes the toothbrush from me and puts it in his mouth. I smirk back at him, and his eyes suddenly dance with humor.

'Don't hesitate to borrow my toothbrush.' His tone is softly mocking.

'Thank you, sir,' I smile gently and leave, going back to bed.

A few minutes later, he joins me.

'You know that's not how I saw it panning tonight,' he mumbles excitedly.

'Imagine if I told you that you couldn't touch me.'

He climbs onto the bed and sits cross-legged.

'Naddalin, I told you. numerous Shadows. I had a rough start in life - you do not want that shit in your head. Why would you do it?'

'Because, I want to know you better.'

'You know me pretty well.'

'How can you say that?' I fight on my knees, facing him.

He rolls his eyes at me, frustrated.

'You roll your eyes. The last time I did this I ended up on your knee.'

'Oh, I would like to get you back to it.'

Inspiration hits me.

'Tell me and you can.'

'What?'

'You hear me.'

'Are you negotiating with me?' Her voice echoes with astonished disbelief.

I agree. Yes... this is the way.

'To negotiate.'

'It doesn't work that way, Naddalin.'

'Okay. Tell me, and I will roll my eyes at you.'

He laughs, and I have a rare glimpse of carefree Grayson. I have not seen him for a while.

He is sober.

'Always so eager and hungry for information.' His gray eyes glow with speculation.

After a while, he gets off Billie's bed Billie fully. 'Don't go,' he said as he left the room.

Trepidation runs through me and I hug myself. What is he doing, does he have an evil plan? Suppose he comes back with a cane or some weird object?

What the fuck, am I gonna do then? When he comes back he is holding something small in his hands. I do not see what it is and I am burning with curiosity.

'When is your first interview tomorrow?' He asks softly.

'Of them.'

A slow, mean smile spreads over his face.

'Good.' And before my eyes, it subtly changes. He is harder, more intractable... hot. It is Dominant Grayson.

'Get off the bed. Stand here.' He points to the bed, and I go up and down in double time. He stares at me, his eyes shining with promise.

'Believe me?' He asks softly.

I agree. He stretches out his hand and in his palm are two round, shiny, silver balls, linked by a thick black thread.

'These are new things,' he says categorically.

I look at him questioningly.

'I'm going to put this in you, and then I'm going to spank you, not to punish you, but for your pleasure and mine.' He pauses, measuring my wide-eyed reaction.

Inside me! I gasp, and all the muscles in my stomach tighten. My inner goddess is dancing with the seven veils.

'So we are gonna fuck, and if you are still awake I will give you some info on my formative years. Okay?'

He is asking for my permission! Out of breath, I nod. I am unable to speak.

'Good girl. Open your mouth.'

Mouth?

'Wider.'

Very gently, he puts his balls in my mouth.

'They need lubrication. Suck,' he orders, his voice soft.

The balls are cold, smooth, surprisingly heavy, and with a metallic taste. My dry mouth filled with saliva as my tongue explored unknown objects. Grayson's gray gaze never leaves mine. Damn, that turns me on. I squirm slightly.

'Be still, Naddalin,' he warns.

'Stop.' He pulls them out of my mouth. Walking over to the bed, he throws the quilt aside and sits on the edge.

'Come here.'

I stand in front of him.

'Now turn around, bend over and grab your ankles.'

I blink at him and his expression darkens.

'Don't hesitate,' he berates me softly, an undercurrent in his voice, and he puts his balls in his mouth.

Damn, that is sexier than the toothbrush. I follow his orders immediately. Jeez, can I touch my ankles, I find that I can, with ease. The t-shirt slides down my back, exposing my behind. Thank goodness I kept my panties on, but I guess I will not be for long.

He places his hand respectfully on my back and strokes it very gently with his whole hand. With my eyes open, I can see his legs through mine, nothing else. I close my eyes firmly as he gently moves my panties to the side and slowly runs his finger up and down my cock. My body readies itself in an intoxicating mixture of wild anticipation and excitement. He slips a finger inside me, and he slowly surrounds it deliciously. Oh, that feels good. I moan.

His breathing stops and I hear him gasp as he repeats the movement. He withdraws his finger and very slowly inserts the objects, a slow and delicious ball at a time. Oh my.

They are at body temperature, warmed by our collective mouths. It is a curious feeling. Once they are inside of me, I cannot smell them - but again, I know they are there.

He straightens my panties and leans forward, and his lips gently kiss my behind.

'Get up,' he orders, and I stand up shaking.

Oh! Now I can feel them... sort of. He grabs my hips to steady me as I restore my balance.

'It's okay?' he asks, his voice stern.

'Yes.' My answer is as soft as a feather.

'Turn around.' I turn around and face him.

The bullets shoot down and involuntarily I huddle around them. The feeling startles me but not bad.

'What does it do?' He asks.

'Strange.'

'Strange good or strange bad?'

'Very strange,' I admit, blushing.

'Good.' There is a hint of humor in his eyes.

'I want a glass of water. Get me one please.'

Oh.

'And when you come back, I'll put you on my knee.' Think about it, Naddalin.

Water He wants water - now - why?

Leaving the room it becomes noticeably clear why he wants me to take a walk - as I do, the balls weigh in me, massaging me inside. It is such a strange feeling and not entirely unpleasant. My breathing quickens as I stretch for a drink in the kitchen cupboard, and gasp. Oh my... I should keep them. They make me needy, in need of sex.

He watches me carefully when I return.

'Thank you,' he said, taking the glass from me.

Slowly, he takes a sip, then sets the glass down on his bedside table. There is a package of foil, ready and waiting, like me. And I know he does this to create anticipation. My heart accelerated. He turns his light gray gaze to mine.

'Come on. Stand next to me. Like last time.'

I sneak up to him, my blood swirling around my body, and this time... I am excited.

Excited.

'Ask me,' he said softly.

I frown. Ask him what?

'Ask me,' her voice is slightly harsher.

What was your water? What does he want?

'Ask me, Naddalin. I will not repeat it.' And there is such a threat implicit in his words, and it occurs to me. He wants me to ask him to spank me.

Holy shit. He looks at me expectantly, his eyes cooling. Shit.

'Spank me, please... sir,' I whisper.

He momentarily closes his eyes, savoring my words. Reaching out, he grabs my left hand and pulls me into his lap. I fall instantly and he stabilizes me as I land on his lap.

My heart is in my mouth as his hand gently caresses me behind. I have reclined on his knees again so that my torso is resting on the bed next to him. This

time he does not throw his leg over mine, but smoothes my hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear. Once he has done, he ties my hair at the back of my neck to hold me in place. He pulls gently and my head pulls back.

'I want to see your face as I spank you, Naddalin,' he whispered, while gently rubbing my back.

His hand goes down between the cheeks of my butt, and he pushes against my cock, and the full feeling is... I moan. Oh, the feeling is exquisite.

'It's for fun, Naddalin, mine and yours,' he whispered.

He raises his hand and lowers it with a resounding slap against the junction of my thighs, my ass, and my cock. The bullets are forced forward inside of me, and I am lost in a quagmire of sensations. The prick in my butt, the fullness of the balls inside of me, and the fact that he was holding me back. I freak out as my faculties try to absorb all these foreign feelings. I notice somewhere in my brain that he did not hit me as hard as the last time. He strokes my back again, running his palm over my skin and my underwear.

Why?

Why didn't he take my panties off? Then his palm disappears, and he brings it down. I moan as the sensation spreads. It starts a pattern: from left to right then down.

Stockings are the best. Everything is moving forward, inside of me... and between each slap, he strokes me, kneads me - so I am massaged inside and out. It is such an uplifting and erotic feeling, and for some reason, because it is on my terms, the pain does not bother me.

It is not painful as such - well it is, but bearable. It is how I make it capable, and yes enjoyable... even. I moan. Yes, I can do it.

He pauses as he slowly peels my panties down my legs. I write on his legs, and not because I want to escape the blows, but I want... more, release, something. His touch against my sensitized skin is all sensual tingling. It is overwhelming, and he is starting over. A few soft slaps are then built, from left to right and below. Oh, the stockings, I moan.

'Good girl, Naddalin,' he moans, and his breathing is irregular.

He spansks me two more times, then he pulls on the little threads attached to the bullets and suddenly pulls them out of me. I am at its peak - the feeling is out of this world. Moving quickly, he turns me around slowly. Instead, I see the tear in the foil bag, then he is lying next to me. He grabs my hands, hoists them above my head, and settles on top of me, inside me, sliding slowly, filling me where the silver globes were. I moan loudly.

'Oh, baby,' he whispers, backing up, forward, a slow sultry tempo, savoring me, feeling me.

It is the sweetest it has ever been, and it does not take any time at all for me to fall over the edge, spiraling into a delicious, violent, and exhausting orgasm. As I hug myself around him, it ignites his release, and he creeps inside me, stilling, gasping at my name in desperate wonder.

'Naddalin!

He is silent and panting over me, his hands still entwined in mine above my head.

Finally, he leans back and looks at me.

'I enjoyed that,' he whispers, then kisses me softly.

He does not linger for sweeter kisses, but gets up, covers me with the duvet, and disappears into the bathroom. On his return, he carries a bottle of white lotion. He sits next to me on the bed.

'Turn around,' he orders, and reluctantly walks past me.

Honestly, this whole thing. I feel very sleepy.

'Your ass is a beautiful color,' he said approvingly, and he tenderly massages the cooling lotion into my pink bottom.

'Spill the beans, Maury,' I yawn.

'Miss Black, you know how to spoil a moment.'

'We had a deal.'

'How do you feel?'

'Short changed.'

He sighs, slips next to me, and hugs me. Be careful not to touch my spiciness behind, we are again spoonful. He kisses me very softly next to my ear.

'The woman who brought me to this world was a fucking crack, Naddalin. Sleep.'

Holy shit... what does that mean?

'Has been?'

'She is dead.'

'How long?'

He sighs.

'She died when I was four. I do not really remember her. Carrick gave me some details. I only remember some things. Please go to sleep.'

'Good night, Grayson.'

'Good night,' Naddalin.

-And-

I slip into a dizzy, exhausted sleep, dreaming of a four-year-old boy with gray eyes in a dark, scary, miserable place.

There is light everywhere. Bright, warm, piercing light and I try to hold it off for a few more precious minutes. I want to hide, a few more minutes. But the glare is too strong and I finally succumb to the awakening. A beautiful New York morning greets me - the sun shines through the full height windows and floods the room with too bright light. Why do not we close the blinds last am the night in Grayson King Maury's bed minus a Grayson Maury.

I lie down for a moment, looking through the windows at the view of the New York skyline. Life in the clouds seems unreal. A fantasy - a castle in the air, drifting off the ground, sheltered from the realities of life - away from neglect, hunger, and

fucking crack mothers. I shudder to think of what he lived as a little child, and I understand why he lives here, isolated, surrounded by beautiful and precious works of art - so far from where he started... mission indeed. I frown because that still does not explain why I cannot touch him.

Ironically, I feel the same here in its high tower. I am adrift of reality. I am in this fantastic apartment, have fantastic sex with my fantastic boyfriend. When the sad reality is he wants a special arrangement, although he said he would try more. This is what I need to clear between us to see if we are still at opposite ends of the swing or if we are gradually getting closer.

I climb out of bed feeling stiff, and for lack of a better term, well used. Yes, that would be all sex then. My subconscious tightens its lips in disapproval. I roll my eyes at her, acknowledging that a certain nervous palm control freak is not in the room, and decide to ask her about the personal trainer. This is if I sign. My inner goddess looks at me in despair. Of course, you will sign. I ignore them both, and after a quick trip to the bathroom, I go looking for Grayson.

He is not in the art gallery, but an elegant middle-aged woman is cleaning the kitchen. The sight of her stops me in my tracks. She has short blonde hair and light blue eyes; she wears a plain white fitted shirt and a navy pencil skirt. She smiles widely when she sees me.

'Hello, Miss Black. Do you want breakfast? His tone is warm but professional, and I am stunned. Who is this blond-haired person in Grayson's kitchen?

I only wear Grayson's t-shirt. I feel embarrassed and embarrassed by my lack of clothes.

'I am afraid you will put me at a disadvantage. My voice is calm, unable to hide the anguish in my voice.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry - I'm Mrs. Jones, Mr. Maury's housekeeper.'

Oh.

'How are you?' I do it.

'Would you like some breakfast, ma'am?'

Mrs!

'Just a little tea would be delicious, thank you. Do you know where Mr. Maury is?

'In his study.'

'Thank you.'

I rushed to the office, mortified. Why does Grayson only have blond-haired people working for him? And a bad thought involuntarily occurs to me - Are they all old subs? I refuse to have this hideous idea. I shyly put my head around the door. He is on the phone, facing the window, in black pants and a white shirt. Her hair is still wet from the shower and I am completely distracted from my negative thoughts.

'Unless this company's P&L improves, I am not interested, Ros. We do not carry dead weight... I no longer need lame excuses... Ask Marco to call me, it is shit or bust time... Yes, tell Barney that the prototype looks good, although I am not sure about the interface... No, there is just something missing... I want to meet him this afternoon to chat...'

He and his team, we can think about... Okay. Transfer me to Andrea... 'He waits, looking out the window, master of his universe, looking at the little people below from that castle in the sky.' Andrea... 'In looking up, he notices me at the door. A slow, sexy smile spread over her beautiful face, and I was left speechless as my insides melted. He is without a doubt the most handsome man on the planet, too good-looking for the little ones below, too good-looking for me.'

No, my inner goddess is watching me, not too good-looking for me. He is mine, for now.

The idea makes me shudder in my blood and dispels my irrational doubt.

He continues his conversation, his eyes never leaving mine.

'Clear my schedule this morning, but ask Bill to call me.' I will be at two o'clock. I must speak to Marco this afternoon, it will take at least half an hour... Schedule Barney and his team after Marco or tomorrow, and find time for me to see Claude every day this week. Tell him to wait... Oh... No, I do not want Darfur commercials... Tell Sam to take care of it... No... What event?... Is it next Saturday?... wait.'

'When will you be back from Georgia?' He asks.

'Friday.'

He resumes his telephone conversation.

'I will need an extra ticket because I have a date... Yes Andrea, that is what I said, a date, Miss Naddalin Black will accompany me... C 'is all.' He hangs up. 'Hello, Miss Black.

'Mr. Maury,' I smile shyly.

He walks around his desk with his usual Billie and stands in front of me. He smells so good; clean and freshly washed, so Grayson. He gently strokes my cheek with the backs of his fingers.

'I did not want to wake you up, you looked so peaceful. Did you sleep well?'

'I am very well rested, thank you. I just came to say hello before taking a shower.'

I watch it, drink it. He leans in and kisses me softly, and I cannot help myself. I throw my arms around her neck and my fingers twist in her still-damp hair.

Pushing my body against hers, I kiss her back. I want it. My attack takes him by surprise, but after a beat, he responds, a low growl in his throat. His hands slide through my hair and down my back to take my bare butt, his tongue exploring my mouth. He pulls back, his eyes veiled.

'Well, sleep seems to be okay with you,' he whispers. 'I suggest you go take a shower, or I'll lay you down on my desk now.'

'I choose the office,' I whisper recklessly as desire sweeps like adrenaline through my system, waking everything in its path.

He looks at me puzzled for a millisecond.

'You really have a taste for it, do not you, Miss Black. You are getting insatiable,' he whispers.

'I only have one taste for you,' I whisper.

Her eyes widen and darken as her hands knead my bareback.

'Damn, only me,' he growls, and suddenly with a smooth movement, he erases all the plans and papers from his desk so that they scatter on the floor, hugs me, and lays me down. on the short end of his desk so my head is out of the edge.

'You want it, you have it, baby,' he mumbles, pulling a package of foil out of his pants pocket as he unzips his pants. Oh, Mr. Boy Scout. He rolls the condom over his erection and looks at me. 'I hope you're ready,' he breathes, a dirty smile on his face. And in an instant, it filled me up, holding my wrists tightly to my side and sinking deep into me.

I moan... oh yes.

'Damn it, Naddalin. You are so ready,' he whispers reverently.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I hold him the only way I can as he remains to stand, staring at me, gray eyes shining, passionate and possessive. He is starting to move, really move. It is not making love, it is fucking - and I love it. I moan. It is so raw, so carnal, driving me so insane. I revel in his possession, his lust extinguishing mine. He moves with ease, basking in me, like me, his lips parted slightly as his breathing quickens.

He twists his hips from side to side and the feel is exquisite.

Oh my. I close my eyes, feeling the buildup - this delicious, slow, climbing climb.

Pushing myself higher, higher towards the castle in the air. Oh yes... her stroke increased slightly. I moan loudly. I am all feeling... all of him, enjoying every push, every push that fills me. And he picks up the pace, pushing faster... harder... and my whole body moves at his pace, and I can feel my legs stiffen, and my insides shake and speed up.

'Come on, baby, give it up for me,' he coaxes through clenched teeth - and the fervent need in his voice - the tension - makes me lose my mind.

I scream a mute, passionate call as I touch the sun and burn, falling around it, falling back, returning to a luminous, gasping peak on Earth. It slams into me and

stops abruptly as it climaxes, pulling on my wrists and sinking Billie fully and without a word on me.

Wow... that was unexpected. I slowly materialize on Earth.

'What are you doing to me?' he breathes, stroking my neck. 'You have completely seduced me, Naddalin. You weave powerful magic.'

He releases my wrists, and I run my fingers through his hair, coming down from my top. I tighten my legs around him.

'It is I who am seduced,' I whisper.

He looks up, looks at me, his expression bewildered, even alarmed. Placing his hands on either side of my face, he holds my head in place.

'You. Are. Mine,' he said, every word being a staccato. 'Do you understand?'

He is so serious, so passionate - a fanatic. The force of his call is so unexpected and disarming. I wonder why he feels like this.

'Yes, yours,' I whisper, derailed by his fervor.

'Are you sure you have to go to Georgia?'

I nod slowly. And in that moment, I can see his expression change, and the shutters come down. Abruptly, he pulls out, making me wince.

'Are you sore?' he asks, leaning over me.

'A little,' I admit.

'I love you badly.' His eyes are burning. 'Reminds you of where I have been, and only me.'

He grabs my chin and kisses me hard, then stands up and holds out his hand to help me up. I look at the foil bag next to me.

'Always prepared,' I whisper.

He looks at me confused as he remakes his fly. I lift the empty package.

'A man can hope, Naddalin, even dream, and sometimes his dreams come true.'

He looks so strange, his eyes burning. I just do not understand. My post-coital glow is quickly fading. What is his problem?

'So, on your desk, was it a dream?' I ask curtly, trying to humorously lighten the mood between us.

He smiles an enigmatic smile that does not reach his eyes, and I immediately know it is not the first time he has made love on his desk. Thought is not welcome. I squirm uncomfortably as my postcoital glow evaporates.

'I'd better go take a shower.' I get up and walk past him.

He frowns and runs a hand through his hair.

'I still have a few calls to make. I will join you for breakfast once you get out of the shower. Mrs. Jones washed your clothes yesterday. They are in the closet.'

What did she do? Jeez, could she hear us, I blush?

'Thanks,' I mumble.

'You're welcome,' he replies automatically, but there is an advantage in his voice.

I am not saying thank you for fucking me. Although it was very...

'What?' He asks, and I realize I am frowning.

'What's wrong?' I ask gently.

'What do you mean?'

'Well... you're weirder than usual.'

'Do you find me weird?' He tries to stifle a smile.

I am blushing.

'Sometimes.'

He looks at me for a moment, his eyes speculative.

'As always, I am surprised by you, Miss Black.'

'Surprised how?'

'Let's just say it was an unexpected treat.'

``We aim to please Mr. Maury. I tilt my head to the side as he often does and returns his words to him.

'And please, you do,' he says, but looks uncomfortable. 'I thought you were going to take a shower.'

Oh, he is firing me.

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'Yeah... uh, I'll see you in a moment.' I rushed out of his office completely stunned.

He looked confused. Why I have to say that the physical experiences are going, it was very satisfying. But emotionally - well, I am rocked by her reaction, and it was about as emotionally rewarding as cotton candy is nutritious.

Mrs. Jones is still in the kitchen.

'Would you like your tea now, Miss Black?'

'I'm going to take a shower first, thank you,' I mumble and quickly walk my flaming face out of the room.

In the shower, I try to figure out what is going on with Grayson. She is the most complicated person I know and cannot understand her ever-changing moods. He looked good when I walked into his office. We had sex... and then he was not. No, I do not understand. I look at my subconscious. She whistles her hands behind her back and looks away from me. She does not have a clue, and my inner goddess always basks in a remnant of post-coital glow. No - we are all ignorant.

I towel dry my hair, style it with Grayson's only hair accessory, and put it in a bun. Maury's plum dress is washed and ironed in the closet with my bra and panties

clean. Mrs. Jones is a wonder. Pulling on Maury's shoes, I straighten my dress, take a deep breath, and walk back to the great room.

Grayson is still missing and Mrs. Jones is checking the contents of the pantry.

'Tea now, Miss Black?' She asks.

'Please.' I smile at him. I feel a little more confident now that I am dressed

'Do you want to eat something?'

'No thanks.'

'Of course, you will have something to eat,' Grayson snaps, his eyes dark.
'She loves pancakes, bacon, and eggs, Mrs. Jones.'

'Yes, Mr. Maury. What do you want, sir.'

'Omelet, please, and some fruit.' He does not take his eyes off me, his expression was unfathomable. 'Sit down,' he orders, pointing to one of the bar stools.

I oblige, and he sits down next to me while Mrs. Jones tends to breakfast.
Gosh, it is annoying that someone else is listening to our conversation.

'Did you buy your plane ticket?'

'No, I'll buy it when I get home - on the Internet.'

He leans on his elbow, rubbing his chin.

'Do you have the money?'

Oh no.

'Yes,' I said with false patience as if I was talking to a small child.

He raises a censored eyebrow at me. Shit.

'Yes, I do, thanks,' I quickly edit.

'I have a jet. It is not planned to be used for three days, it is available to
you.'

I am speechless. Of course, he has a throw, and I must resist my body's natural inclination to roll my eyes at him. I want to laugh. But I do not, because I cannot read his mood.

'We have made serious abuse of your company's aviation fleet before. I would not want to do it again.'

'This is my company also in Pittsburgh is steel, this is my jet.' He almost looks hurt. Oh, the boys and their toys!

'Thanks for the offer. But I would be happier to take a scheduled flight.'

He seems to want to argue more but decides not to.

'As you want,' he sighs. 'Do you have a lot of preparation to do for your interview?'

'No.'

'Good. You are still not going to tell me which publishing houses?'

'No.'

Her lips curl up in a reluctant smile.

'I am a man of means, Miss Black.'

'I am fully aware of this, Mr. Maury. Are you going to track my phone? I ask innocently.'

'Actually, I'll be pretty busy this afternoon, so I'm going to have to get someone else to do it.'

He smiles.

Is he kidding?

'If you can spare someone to do this, you're obviously overstaffed.'

'I'm going to email the human resources manager and ask her to look at our workforce.' Her lips twist to hide her smile.

Oh thank you, Lord, he got his sense of humor back.

Mrs. Jones serves us breakfast and we eat quietly for a few moments. After cleaning the pots, tactfully, she leaves the living room. I am watching him.

'What is it, Naddalin?'

'You know, you never told me why you don't like to be touched.'

He turns white, and his reaction makes me feel guilty for asking.

'I've told you more than I've ever told anyone.' His voice is calm as he looks at me impassively.

-And-

It is clear to me that he never confides in anyone. Doesn't he have close friends? He told Ms. MLF stifler's mom wanted to ask her, but I cannot - I cannot force this invasively. I shake my head at the realization. It is an island.

'Will you be thinking about our arrangement while you are away?' He asks.

'Yes.'

'Will you miss me?

I look at him, surprised by his question.

'Yes,' I answered honestly.

How could he have meant so much to me in such a brief time? It is under my skin... literally. He smiles and his eyes light up.

'I will miss you too. More than you think,' he hisses.

My heart warms at his words. He is trying hard. He gently strokes my cheek, leans in, and kisses me softly.

It is late afternoon, and I am sitting nervous and restless in the lobby waiting for MJ Hyde from New York Independent Publishing. This is my second interview today and the one that worries me the most. My first interview went well, but it was for a larger conglomerate with offices based across the United States, and I would be one of the many editorial assistants there. I can imagine being swallowed up and spat out quickly in such a corporate machine.

SIP is where I want to be. He is small and unconventional, champions local writers, and has an interesting and quirky client list.

My surroundings are sparse, but it is a statement of design rather than frugality. I am sitting on one of the two dark green leather chesterfield sofas - much like the sofa, Grayson has in his playroom. I stroke the leather with appreciation and lazily wonder what Grayson is doing on this couch. My mind wanders, thinking of the possibilities... no - I do not have to go now. I blush at my capricious and inappropriate thoughts.

The receptionist is a young African American woman with large silver earrings and long slicked-back hair. She has a bohemian air, the kind of woman I could be friends with. The thought is comforting. At all times, she looks at me, away from her computer, and smiles reassuringly. I temporarily returned her smile.

My flight is booked; my mother is in seventh heaven that I visit; I am packed and Maury has agreed to drive me to the airport. Grayson ordered me to take my BlackBerry and the Mac. I roll my eyes at the memory of his bossy authoritarianism, but now I realize that is how he is. He likes to control everything, including me. Yet it is also so unpredictable and disarming. He can be tender, cheerful, even gentle. And when it is, it is so left on the ground and unexpected. He insisted on accompanying me to my car in the garage. Damn, I am only going for a few days, he acts like I have been going for weeks. He always keeps me on the back foot.

'Naddalin Black? A woman with long, black Pre-Raphaelite hair, standing near the reception desk, distracts me from my introspection. She has the same bohemian and flowing look as the receptionist. She could be in her thirties, in her forties. It is so hard to tell with older women.

'Yes,' I replied, holding myself awkwardly.

She gives me a polite smile, her cool hazel eyes assessing me. I am wearing one of Maury's dresses, a black apron over a white blouse and my black pumps. Very interview, I think. My hair is pulled back in a pot Pittsburgh tail, and for once the tendrils behave on their own... she holds out her hand to me.

'Hi Naddalin, my name is Elizabeth Morgan. I am the Human Resources Manager here at SIP.' 'How are you?' I shake his hand. She seems very relaxed to be the head of human resources.

'Please follow me.'

We go through the double doors behind the reception, we enter a large brightly colored open-plan office, and from there we make our way to a small meeting room. The walls are pale green, lined with photos of book covers. At the head of the Maplewood, conference table is a young man with red hair tied in a pot Pittsburgh tail. Small silver earrings sparkle in both ears. He wears a pale blue shirt, no tie, and Maury flannel pants. As I approach him, he stands up and looks at me with unfathomable dark blue eyes.

'Naddalin Black, I'm Jack Hyde, the editor-in-chief here at SIP, and it's great to meet you.'

We shake hands, and his dark expression is unreadable, though quite friendly, I think.

'Have you traveled far?' He asks pleasantly.

'No, I recently moved to the Pike Street Market area.'

'Oh, not far at all then. Please sit down.'

I sit down and Elizabeth takes a seat next to him.

'So why would you want to intern for us at SIP, Naddalin?' he asks.

He said my name softly and cocked his head to the side, like someone I know - it is baffling. Doing my best to ignore the irrational distrust he inspires, I launch into my carefully prepared speech, aware that a pink blush is spreading across my cheeks. I watch them both, remembering The Mary Smith Successful Interviewing Technique - maintain eye contact, Naddalin! Boy, this woman can be bossy too sometimes. Jack and Elizabeth both listen intently.

'You have a very impressive GPA. What extracurricular activities have you engaged in at OVHS?'

Do me a favor, I blink at him. What a strange choice of words. I dive into the details of my librarianship at the central campus library and my only experience interviewing an obscenely rich bully for the student magazine. I ignore the part where I did not author the article. I mention the two literary societies I belonged to and end

with a job at Eastwood and all the unnecessary knowledge I now have on hardware and DIY.

They both laugh, which I hoped. Slowly I relax and start having fun.

Jack Hyde asks sharp and intelligent questions, but I do not mind - I keep going, and when we discuss my reading preferences and favorite books, I am doing fine. Jack, on the other hand, seems to favor only American literature written after 1950. Nothing else.

No classics - not even Henry James or Upton Sinclair or F Scott Fitzgerald. Elizabeth does not say anything, nods occasionally, and takes notes. Jack, while argumentative, is charming in his way, and my initial suspicion dissipates as we speak.

'And where do you see yourself in five years?' he asks.

With Grayson Murray, the idea involuntarily comes to mind. My wandering mind makes me frown. 'Copy editing maybe. A literary agent, I am not sure. I am open to opportunities.' He smiles. 'Very well, Naddalin. I have no more questions. How about you?' he addressed his question to me. 'When would you like someone to start?' I ask. 'As soon as possible,' Elizabeth said. 'When could you start?' 'I am available from next week.' 'Good to know,' said Jack. 'If that's all Pittsburgh one has to say,' Elizabeth looks at both of us, 'that wraps up the interview.' She smiles sweetly. 'It was a pleasure meeting you, Naddalin,' Jack said softly, taking my hand. He squeezes him gently so that I blink at him as I say goodbye to him. I feel unsteady as I walk towards my car, although I do not know why.

The interview went well, but it is so hard to tell. Interviews seem like artificial situations, each of their best behavior desperately trying to hide behind a professional facade. Was my face okay? I will have to wait and see. I get in my Audi A3 and go back to the apartment, even if I take time. I am on red eyes with a layover in Atlanta, but my flight does not leave until 10:25 am tonight, so I have plenty of time. Maury is unpacking boxes in the kitchen when I get back. 'How did they go?' she asks excitedly. Only Maury can look stunning in an oversized shirt, ragged jeans, and a dark blue bandana. 'Good, thanks, Maury.

I am not sure this outfit is cool enough for the second interview.' 'Oh?' 'Boho-chic could have done it.' Maury raises an eyebrow. 'You and boho-chic.' She tilts her head to one side - Gah! Why Everyone Reminds Me of My Favorite numerous

'Shadows,' Naddalin, you're one of the few people who can get that look away.' I smile. 'I liked the second place. I think I could fit in there. The guy who interviewed me was annoying though,' I stop - shit I am talking to Foghorn Smith here. Shut up Naddalin! 'Oh?' Mary Smith's radar for interesting information kicks in - a tidbit that will only resurface at an inopportune and embarrassing time, which reminds me. 'Incidentally - would you please stop picking up Grayson? Your comment about Sam yesterday at dinner was irrelevant. He is a jealous guy. It is no use, you know.' 'Look, if he were not Jack's brother I would have said a lot worse. He is a real control freak. I do not know how you put up with him. I was trying to make him jealous - give - him a little help with his. engagement issues. 'She throws her hands up defensively.

'But - if you don't want me to intervene, I won't,' she said hastily through my scowl. 'Good. Life with Grayson is complicated enough, trust me.' Damn, I look like him. 'Naddalin,' she stops, staring at me. 'You're okay, aren't you? Aren't you running to your mother's house to escape?' I rinse. 'No Maury. You said I needed a break.' She narrows the distance between us and takes my hands - one of the most unpleasant things to do in Murray. Oh no... tears threaten. 'You are just, I do not know... different. I hope you are doing well, and whatever problems you have with Mr. Moneybags, you can talk to me. And I will try not to dispel it., but frankly, it is like shooting a fish in a barrel with it. Listen, Naddalin, if something is wrong you will tell me, I will not judge. I will try to understand. 'I am blinking. tears. 'Oh, Maury. I hug her. 'I fell in love with him.' 'Naddalin, anyone can see that. And he is fallen in love with you. He is mad at you. He will not take his eyes off.' I laugh at the uncertainty. 'Do you think so?' 'Didn't he tell you?' 'Not in so many words.' 'Did you tell him?'

'Not in so many words.' I shrug my shoulders to apologize. 'Naddalin! Someone must take the first step, or you are not going to Pittsburgh where.' What... tell him how I feel? 'I'm just afraid to scare him.' 'And how do you know he doesn't feel the same way?' 'Grayson, scared, I can't imagine him being afraid of anything.' But as I say the words, I imagine him as a little child. Fear was all he knew then. Sorrow grips and grips my heart at the thought. Maury looks at me with pursed lips and narrowed eyes, much like my subconscious - all she needs are the halfpipe specs. 'You have to sit down and talk to each other.' 'We haven't talked much lately.' I rinse. Other things. Non-verbal communication and it is okay. Well, more than good. She smiles. 'It will be the sexing! If that goes well, then that is half the battle Naddalin. I am going to have some Chinese takeout. Are you ready to go?' 'I will - we don't have to be gone for a few hours or so.' 'No, I'll see you at twenty.' She grabs her jacket and leaves,

forgetting to close the door. I closed it behind her and walked to my room, considering her words. Is Grayson afraid of his feelings for me? Does he even have feelings for me? surely. I realize that while I am away, I will have to go through all our conversations again and see if I can spot any telltale signs. I will miss you too... more than you think... you completely seduced me... I shake my head. I do not want to think about it now.

I am charging the BlackBerry, so I have not had it with me all afternoon. I approach it with caution and am disappointed that there are no messages. I turn on the average machine, and there are no messages either. Same email address Naddalin - my subconscious is staring at me and for the first time, I understand why Grayson wants to spank me when I do this. Okay. Well, I will write him an email. From: Naddalin Black Subject: Interviews Date: May 30, 2009, 6:49 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Sir My interviews went well today. We think you might be interested. How was your day? Naddalin I sit down and look at the screen. Grayson's responses are usually instantaneous. I wait... and I wait, and finally, I hear the welcome ping from my inbox. From: Grayson Murray Subject: My Day Date: May 30, 2009, 7:03 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black Everything you do interests me, you are the most fascinating woman I know.

I am glad your talks went well. My morning exceeded all expectations. My afternoon was very boring in comparison. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: Fine Morning Date: May 30, 2009, 7:05 PM To Grayson Maury Dear, Sir The morning has been exemplary for me too, despite you astounding me after the impeccable office sex. Do not think I have not noticed. Thanks for the breakfast. Or thank you, Mrs. Jones. I would like to ask you some questions about it - without you pushing my head again. Naddalin My finger hovers over the send button, and I am reassured that I will be on the other side of the continent this time around tomorrow. From: Grayson Murray Subject: The publication and you? Date: May 30, 2009, 7:10 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin 'Weird' is not a verb and should not be used by anyone wishing to get into publishing.

Impeccable Compared to what, pray, say it And what do you have to ask about Mrs. Jones I am intrigued. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Naddalin Black Subject: You and Ms. Jones Date: May 30, 2009, 7:17 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Sir Language is evolving and moving on. It is an organic thing. It is not stuck in an ivory tower, hanging from expensive works of art, and overlooking most of New York City with a helipad glued to its roof. Impeccable - compared to other times we have... what is your word... oh yes... fucked. The fuck was flawless, period,

IMHO - but as you know I have extremely limited experience. Is Mrs. Jones your old submarine? Naddalin My finger hovers over the send button again and I press it. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Language. Watch your mouth! Date: May 30, 2009, 7:22 PM To Naddalin Black Naddalin Ms. Jones is a valued employee.

I never had a relationship with her beyond our professional relationship. I do not employ anyone with whom I have had sex. I am shocked you think so. The only person I would take exception to this rule is you - because you are a bright young woman with remarkable negotiating skills. However, if you continue to use such language, I may have to reconsider taking you here. I am glad you have limited experience. Your experience will continue to be limited - just for me. I will take the flawlessness as a compliment - although, with you, I never know if that is what you mean, or if your sense of iroPittsburgh takes over - as usual. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. From Her Ivory Tower From Naddalin Black Subject: Not For All Tea In China Date: May 30, 2009, 7:27 PM To Grayson Murray Dear, Mr. Maury, I voiced it before my reservations to work for your company Pittsburgh. My views on this have not changed, do not change, and never will. I must leave you now because Maury has returned with food. My sense of eros Pittsburgh and I wish you good night. I will contact you once I am in Georgia. Naddalin From: Grayson Murray Subject: Even Twinings English Breakfast Tea?

Date: May 30, 2009, 7:29 PM To Naddalin Black Goodnight Naddalin. Hope you and your sense of eros Pittsburgh have a good flight. Grayson Murray CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Maury, and I pull up outside the drop-off area at the Sea-Tac airport terminal. Leaning across, she hugs me. 'Enjoy Barbados, Maury. Have a wonderful vacation.' 'I will see you when I come back. Do not let the old bags of money crush you.' 'I will not do it.' We kiss again - then I am alone. I head to check-in and stand in line, waiting with my carry-on baggage. I did not bother with a suitcase, just a smart backpack Ray gave me for my last birthday. 'Ticket please?' The bored young man behind the desk raises his hand without looking at me. Reflecting on his boredom, I hand in my ticket and driver's license as ID. I hope for a window seat if possible.

'Okay, Miss Black. You have been upgraded to first class.' 'What?' 'Ma'am, if you want to go to the first class lounge and wait for your flight there.' He seems to have woken up and beams at me like I am the Christmas fairy and the Easter bunny in one. 'There must be a mistake.' 'No no.' He checks his computer screen again. 'Naddalin Black - upgrade.' He is cooking me. Ugh. I squint my eyes. He hands me my

boarding pass and I walk into the first class lounge, muttering under my breath. Damn control freak Grayson Maury - he just cannot get away well enough on his own.

I am treated, massaged and I drank two glasses of champagne. The First Class lounge has many excellent features. With every sip of Moët, I feel a little more inclined to forgive Grayson and his intervention. I open my MacBook, hoping to test the theory that it works in Pittsburgh where on the planet.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Too extravagant gestures

Date: May 30, 2009 9:53 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

What worries me is how you knew which flight I was on.

Your hunt knows no bounds. Hopefully, Dr. LORENZO is back from vacation.

I had a manicure, a back massage, and two glasses of champagne - a great start to the holiday.

Thank you.

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: You are welcome

Date: May 30, 2009 9:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black The

Dr. LORENZO is back, and I have an appointment this week.

Who massaged your back?

Grayson Murray

CEO with friends in all the right places, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Aha! The time of the refund. Our flight has been called, so I will email her from the plane. It will be safer. I almost hug myself with mischievous glee.

There is so much room in first class. Cocktail of champagne in hand, I settle into the plush leather window seat as the cabin slowly fills. I call Ray to tell him where I am

- a fortunately brief call because it is too late for him.

'I love you daddy,' I whisper.

'You too, girly. Say hello to your mother. Good night.'

'Good evening.' I am hanging up.

Ray is in decent shape. I look at my Mac and with the same building of childish joy.

When I open my laptop, I log into the email program.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Strong Able Hands

Date: May 30, 2009, 10:22 p.m.

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

A genuinely nice young man massaged my back. Yes. Very pleasant indeed. I would not have met Jean-Paul in the regular departure lounge - so thank you again for the treat. I am not sure if I will be allowed to email once we take off, and I need my restful sleep because I have not been sleeping so well lately.

The most peasantleasant dreams Mr. Maury... thinking of you.

Naddalin

Oh, he is going to turn around - and I will be up in the air and out of reach. Serves him well.

If I had been in the regular departure lounge, Jean-Paul would not have reached out to me. He was a genuinely nice young man, in a blonde, permanently tanned manner - honestly, who has a tan in New York. This is so wrong. He was gay - but I will keep that detail to myself. I look at my email. Maury is right. It is like shooting a fish in a barrel with it. My subconscious is staring at me with an ugly twist to its mouth - do you want to turn it up? What he did was nice, you know! He cares about you and wants you to travel style. Yes, but he could have asked or told me. It did not make me look like a full klutz on the recording. I hit send and wait, feeling like a very naughty girl.

'Miss Black, you'll need to put your laptop away for take off,' the oversized flight attendant said politely. She makes me jump. My guilty conscience is at work.

'Oh sorry.'

Shit. Now I will have to wait to find out if he answered. She hands me a soft blanket and pillow, showing her perfect teeth. I drape the blanket over my knees. It is nice to feel mollycoddle sometimes.

The cabin has filled up, except for the seat next to me which is still unoccupied. Oh no... a disturbing thought crosses my mind. The seat is Grayson's. Oh shit... no... he would not do that. Would he tell me that I did not want him to come with me? I glance anxiously at my watch, then the disembodied voice from the cockpit announces, 'Cabin crew, auto and cross-control doors.' What miNaddalin are they shutting the doors My goals as I sit in throbbing anticipation?

The seat next to me is the only one unoccupied in the sixteen-seat cabin. The plane jumps away from its support, and I feel relieved, but I also feel a slight tingling of disappointment... no Grayson for four days. I glance at my BlackBerry. From: Grayson Murray Subject: Enjoy it while you can Date: May 30, 2009, 10:25 PM To Naddalin Black Deer, Miss Black I know what you are trying to do - and believe me - you have succeeded. Next time you will be in the cargo hold, tied up, and gagged in a crate. Believe me when I tell you that taking care of you in this state will give me so much more pleasure than just upgrading your ticket. I look forward to your return.

Grayson Murray Palm-Twitching CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Holy shit. That is the problem with Grayson's humor - I can never be sure if he is joking or if he is seriously angry. I suspect on this occasion that he is seriously angry.

Surreptitiously, so the flight attendant could not see, I typed an answer under the blanket.

From: Naddalin Black Subject: kidding? Date: May 30, 2009, 10:30 PM To Grayson Murray You see - I do not know if you are kidding - and if you are not - then I am going to stay in Georgia. Checkouts are a tough limit for me. Sorry for driving you crazy. Tell me you forgive me. To Frommollycoddled Grayson Murray Subject: Joke Date: May 30, 2009, 10:31 PM To Naddalin Black How do you send emails? Risk the lives of everyone on board, including yourself, by using your BlackBerry this is against one of the rules.

Grayson Maury Two Palms Twitching CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. Two Palms! I put my BlackBerry away, sit down as the plane rolls down to the runway, and pull out my tattered copy of Tess - a light read for the trip. Once we are in flight, I tilt my seat back, and soon I fall asleep.

The flight attendant wakes me up as we begin our descent to Atlanta. Local time is 5h 45, but I only slept about four hours... I feel dizzy, but grateful for the glass of orange juice she hands me. I looked nervously at my BlackBerry. There are no more emails from Grayson. Well, it is almost three in the morning in New York City, and he wants to discourage me from screwing up the avionics system, or whatever keeps planes from flying if cell phones are on.

The wait in Atlanta is only an hour. And again, I lounge within the confines of the first-class lounge. I am tempted to curl up and fall asleep on one of the plush, inviting sofas that gently sink under my weight. But it just will not be long enough. To keep me awake, I run a long stream of consciousness to Grayson on my laptop.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Do you like to scare me?

Date: May 31, 2009 6:52 AM EST

To: Grayson Maury

You know how much I do not like you spending money on me. Yes, you are extraordinarily rich, but it still makes me uncomfortable, like you are paying me for sex. However, I like to travel first class, it is so much more civilized than the coach. So thanks. I think so - and I enjoyed Jean Paul's message. He was very gay. I omitted this

passage from my email to wind you up because I was angry with you, and I am sorry for that.

But as usual, you overreact. You cannot write me things like this - bound and gagged in a crate - (were you serious or was that a joke?) That scares me... you scare me... I am completely taken in by your charm, considering a lifestyle with you that I did not even know existed until last Saturday, and then you write something like that and I want to run screaming in the hills. I will not, of course, because I would miss you. I miss you. I want us to work, but I am terrified of how deep I feel for you and how dark you are leading me. What you are offering is erotic and sexy, and I am curious, but I am also worried that you will hurt me - physically and emotionally. After three months you could say goodbye, and where will that leave me if you do? But then risk exists in any relationship. It is just not the kind of relationship I envisioned having, especially as my first one. It is a huge leap of faith for me.

You were right when you said I do not have submissive bones in my body... and I agree with you now. That said, I want to be with you, and if that is what I must do, I would love to try it, but I think I will suck and end up black and blue - and I do not like that idea at all.

I am so glad you said you would try more. I just need to think about what

'More' means to me, and that is one of the reasons I wanted some distance. You dazzle me so much that I have a tough time thinking clearly when we are together.

They call my flight. I must go.

Later

Your Naddalin.

I hit send and went asleep at the boarding gate to board another plane.

This one only has six seats in First Class, and once we are up in the air, I snuggle up under my plush blanket and fall asleep.

Too early I am awakened by the flight attendant offering me more orange juice as we begin our approach to Savannah International. I sip slowly, past the fatigue, and allow myself to feel a minimum of excitement. I am going to see my mother for the first time in six months. Sneaking another secret look at my BlackBerry, I vaguely

remember sending Grayson a long email - but there was nothing in response. It is five in the morning in New York - I hope he is still sleeping and not ready to play sad laments on his piano.

The beauty of cabin backpacks is that you can get out of the airport in the breeze and not have to wait forever for luggage at the carousels. The beauty of traveling first class is that they let you get off the plane first.

My mom is waiting with Bob, and it is so good to see them. I do not know if it is because of the exhaustion, the long trip, or the whole situation with Grayson, but as soon as I am in my mother's arms, I burst into tears.

'Oh Naddalin, honey. You must be so tired.' She glances at Bob anxiously.

'No mom, it's just - I'm so glad to see you.' I hug her tightly.

She feels so good and welcoming and at home. Reluctantly, I give him up, and Bob gives me an awkward hug on one arm. He seems unsteady on his feet and I remember he injured his leg.

'Welcome back, Naddalin. Why are you crying?' he asks. 'Oh, Bob, it's just good to see you too.' I look at her beautiful square-jawed face and her sparkling blue eyes gazing at me fondly. I love this husband, mom. You can keep it. He takes my backpack. 'Damn, Naddalin, what have you got here?' It will be the Mac, and they both put their arms around me as we walked into the parking lot. I always forget how incredibly hot it is in Savannah. Leaving the cool air-conditioned confines of the arrival terminal, we step into the Georgia heat as we wear it. Whoa!

It undermines everything. I must get rid of mom and Bob's hug so I can get my hoodie off. I am so glad I packed some shorts. I miss the dry heat of Vegas sometimes, where I lived with mom and Bob when I was seventeen, but that humid heat, even at 8:30 a.m, takes some getting used to. By the time I am in the back of Bob's wonderfully air-conditioned Tahoe SUV, I feel limp and my hair has started a frizzy protest at the heat.

In the back of the SUV, I quickly write to Ray, Maury, and Grayson:

~ <3 Arrived safely in Savannah. R :-)

My thoughts wander briefly to Sam as I hit send, and through the haze of my fatigue, I remember it is her show next week. Should I invite Grayson to know what he thinks of Sam? Grayson will still want to see me after this email, I shudder at the thought, then put it out of my mind. I will come back to this later. Right now, I will be enjoying my mother's company.

'Honey, you must be tired. Would you like to sleep when we get home?'

'No, mom. I would like to go to the beach.'

I am in my blue halter tankini, sipping a diet Coke, on a deckchair facing the Atlantic Ocean, and I think that just yesterday I was looking at the Sound towards the Pacific.

My mom sits next to me in a ridiculously large sun hat and Jackie O sunglasses, sipping her own Coke. We are on Tybee Island Beach, just three blocks from the house.

She is holding my hand. My fatigue has decreased and by taking the sun I feel comfortable, safe, and warm. For the first time in forever, I started to relax.

'So-o Naddalin... tell me about this man who's got you in such a mess.'

Turn! How can she say What to say? I cannot talk about Grayson in detail because of the NDA, but even then, if I choose to tell my mom about it, I would whitewash the thought.

'Good?' she invites me over and shakes my hand.

'His name is Grayson. He is more than handsome. He is rich... too rich. He is overly complicated and mercurial.'

Yes, I feel extremely satisfied with my concise and precise summary. I turn to face her, just as she makes the same movement. She looks at me with her crystal blue eyes.

'Complicated and mercurial are the two pieces of information I want to focus on, Naddalin.'

Oh no...!!!

'Oh, mum, his mood swings make me dizzy. He had a dark upbringing, so he is very closed, hard to assess.'

'Do you love him?'

'I love him more than that.'

'Really?' She mouths me speechless.

'Yes mom.'

'Men are not complicated, Naddalin, honey. They are amazingly simple, literal creatures.'

They mean what they say. And we spend hours trying to analyze what they said - when it is obvious. If I were you, I would take it. It might help. '

I am speechless. Sounds like good advice. Take Grayson. Immediately some of the things he said come to mind.

I do not want to lose you...

You have bewitched me...

You completely seduced me...

I will miss you too... more than you know...

I look at my mother. She is on her fourth marriage. She knows something about men.

'Most men are my brooding sweetheart, some more than others. Take your father for example...' Her eyes soften and sorrow whenever she thinks of my father. My real father, this mythical man I never knew, tore us so cruelly in a combat training accident when he was a sailor. Part of me thinks my mom has been looking for someone like my dad all this time... she finally found what she was looking for in Bob. Too bad she cannot find him with Ray.

'I used to think your dad was in a bad mood. But now when I look back he was too caught up in his job and trying to make a living for us. She sighs. 'He was so young, we both were. That was the problem.'

Hmm... Grayson is not old. I smile affectionately at him. She can get very touching thinking about my father, but I am sure he had nothing on Grayson's moods.

'Bob wants to take us out for dinner tonight. To his golf club.'

'Oh no! Bob started playing golf?' I laugh in disbelief.

'Tell me about this,' my mother moaned, rolling her eyes.

After a light lunch back home, I start to unpack. I will treat myself to a siesta. My mom's gone to cast candles or whatever she is doing with them, and Bob's at work, so I have time to get some sleep. I open the Mac and run it.

It is two in the afternoon in Georgia, eleven in the morning in New York. I wonder if I have a response from Grayson. Nervously, I logged into the mail program.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Finally!

Date: May 31, 2009 7:30 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

I am annoyed that as soon as you put some distance between us, you openly and honestly communicate with me. Why can't you do this when we are together?

Yes, I am rich. Get used to it. Why shouldn't I spend the money on you? We told your dad that I am your boyfriend, for heaven's sake. Is not that what boyfriends do. As your Dom, I would expect you to accept whatever I spend on you without any arguments. Tell your mother that too.

I do not know how to respond to your comment about feeling like a whore. I know that is not what you wrote, but that is what you are implying. I do not know what I can say or do to eradicate these feelings. I wish you had the best of everything. I work extremely hard so I can spend my money however I want. I could buy your heart's desire from you, Naddalin, and I want it. Call it wealth redistribution if you will. Or just knowing that I could not, I could never think of you the way you described it, and I am angry that you perceive yourself. For such a bright, witty, and beautiful young

woman, you have real self-esteem issues, and I have half a mind to make an appointment for you with Dr. LORENZO.

I apologize for scaring you. I find the idea of instilling fear in you odious. Do you think I would let you travel in the hold, I gave you my private jet for heaven's sake. Yes, it was a joke, obviously a bad one. However, the point is, the thought of you being tied up and gagged turns me on (not kidding - it is.) I can lose the cash register - the cash registers do nothing for me. I know you have gag issues we talked about it and if / when I gag you, we will discuss it. What I think you do not realize is that in Dom / Sub relationships, it is the sub that has all the power. It is you. I will repeat this - you are the one with all the power. Not me. In the boathouse, you said no. I cannot touch you if you say no - that is why we have a deal - what you will and will not do. If we try things out and you do not like them, we can revise the deal. It is up to you - not me. And if you do not want to be bound and gagged in a crate, that is not going to happen.

I want to share my lifestyle with you. I never wanted anything so much. Frankly, I am in awe of you whoever is so innocent would be willing to try it. It says more about me than you could ever imagine. Can't you see I am caught up in your spell too, even though I have told you countless times? I do not want to lose you. I am worried that you have traveled three thousand kilometers to get away from me for a few days because you cannot think clearly around me. It is the same for me Naddalin. My reason disappears when we are together -

This is the depth of my feelings for you.

I understand your apprehension. I tried to stay away from you; I knew you were inexperienced, although I would never have sued you if I had known exactly how innocent you were - and yet you still do it to completely disarms me in a way no one has ever experienced before... Your email for example I have read and reread countless times trying to understand your point of view. Three months is an arbitrary length. We could do six months a year. How long do you want this to be? What would make you comfortable?

Tell me.

I understand this is a huge leap of faith for you. I must earn your trust, but at the same time, you must communicate with me when I fail to do so. You seem so strong and self-sufficient, then I read what you wrote here, and I see another side of

you. We need to guide each other, Naddalin, and I can only inspire you. You must be honest with me and we both must find a way to make this arrangement work.

You worry about not being submissive. Well, it is true. That said, the only

Once you have the right behavior for a submarine, it is in the playroom. It seems like this is the only place where you allow me to exercise proper control over you, and the only place where you do as you are told. The term that comes to mind is exemplary. And I never beat you black and blue. I am aiming for pink. Outside of the playroom, I like you to challenge me. It is a very new and refreshing experience, and I would not want to change that. So yes, tell me what you want in terms of more. I will try to keep an open mind and try to give you the space you need and stay away from you while you are in Georgia. I look forward to your next email.

In the meantime, have fun. But not too much.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit. He authored an essay like we were back to school - and most of it was good. My heart is in my mouth as I reread his epistle, and I curl up on the spare bed, practically hugging my Mac. Make our deal a year, I have the power! Damn, I am gonna must think about it. Take it, that is what my mother says. He does not want to lose me.

He said that twice! He also wants it to work. Oh Grayson, me too! He will try to stay away! Does that mean he might not stay away? Suddenly I hope so. I want to see him. We have been apart for less than twenty-four hours, and knowing that I cannot see him for four days, I realize how much I miss him. How much I love him.

'Naddalin, honey. The voice is soft and warm, full of love and sweet memories of the past. A soft hand brushes my face. My mom wakes me up and I am wrapped around my laptop, hugging it against me.

'Naddalin, sweetheart,' she continued in her sweet singing voice as I resumed my sleep, blinking in the pale pink light of dusk.

'Hi Mom.' I stretch and smile.

'We're going to have dinner in thirty minutes.' Do you still want to come? she asks gently.

'Oh, yeah, mom, sure.' I try extremely hard, but I cannot seem to stifle my yawn.

'Now that's awesome technology.' She shows me my laptop.

Oh shit.

'Oh... that?' I am looking for a relaxed and surprising nonchalance.

Mom will notice that she seems to have gotten smarter since I acquired a 'boyfriend'.

'Grayson loaned it to me. I think I could fly the space shuttle with it, but I only use it for email and Internet access.'

It is nothing. Looking at me suspiciously, she sits up on the bed and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

'Has he emailed you?'

Oh, shit on that piss.

'Yes.' My nonchalance wears off and I blush.

'Maybe she misses you, huh?'

'I hope so, mom.'

'What is he saying?'

Oh, frapping shit. I am frantically trying to think of something acceptable from this email that I can tell my mom. I am sure she does not want to hear about Doms, bondage, and gagging, but I cannot tell her because there is the NDA.

'He told me to have fun, but not too much.'

'Sounds reasonable. I will let you get ready, honey.' Leaning down, she kisses my forehead. 'I am so glad you are here, Naddalin. It is wonderful to see you. And with this declaration of love, she leaves.

Hmm, Grayson and Reasonable... two concepts that I thought were mutually exclusive, but after his email anything is possible. I shake my head. I will need some time to digest his words. After dinner - and I can answer him then. I get out of bed and quickly slip my t-shirt and shorts on, and head for the shower.

I brought Maury's gray halter neck dress I wore for my graduation. It is the only dressy item I have. A good thing about the heat is that the creases have fallen out so I think that will do the trick for the golf club. While dressing, I wake up the laptop. There is nothing new from Grayson, and I feel a hint of disappointment. Very quickly, I typed him an email.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Verbose?

Date: May 31, 2009 7:08 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sir, you are a talkative writer. I must go to dinner at Bob's Golf Club, and just to let you know, I roll my eyes at the thought. But you and your sinewy palm are far away from me, so my butt is safe, for now. I loved your email. Will respond when I can. I already miss you.

Enjoy your afternoon.

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:10 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I am distracted by the title of this email. It is safe - for now.

Enjoy your dinner, and I miss you too, especially your butt and your smart mouth.

My afternoon will be dull, lit only by thoughts of you and your rolling eyes.
It was you who so aptly pointed out to me that I too suffer from this bad habit.

Grayson Maury

CEO and Eye Roller, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Eye Rolling

Date: May 31, 2009 7:14 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

Stop emailing me. I am trying to get ready for dinner. You are very distracting, even when you are on the other side of the continent. And yes - who spans you when you roll your eyes?

Your Naddalin, I hit send, and immediately the image of that wicked witch Mrs. MLF stifler's mom comes to mind. I cannot imagine it. Grayson being beaten by someone as old as my mom is so wrong. Again, I wonder what damage she has caused. My mouth hangs in a hard, sinister line. I need a doll to stick pins on, that way I can vent some of the anger I feel against this stranger.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:18 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I still prefer my title to yours, in so many ways. I am lucky that I am the expert in my destination Pittsburgh and that no one berates me. Except for my mom now and then and Dr. LORENZO, of course. And you.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Chastising... Me?

Date: May 31, 2009 7:22 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

When have I ever had the courage to chastise you, Mr. Maury? You are mingling with someone else... which is very disturbing. I must prepare myself.

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Your behind

Date: May 31, 2009 4:25 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

You do it all the time in print. Can I close your dress?

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

For some reason, his words slip off the page and make me gasp. Oh... he wants to play games.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: NC-17

Date: May 31, 2009 7:28 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

I would rather you unzip it.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Be careful what you want...

Date: May 31, 2009 4:31 PM

To: Naddalin Black

SO WOULD BE I.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Panting

Date: May 31, 2009 7:33 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Slowly...

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Moan

Date: May 31, 2009, 4:35 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I would have liked to be there.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Moans

Date: May 31, 2009 7:37 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

SO DO I -

'Naddalin!' My mother calls me, makes me jump. Shit. Why do I feel so guilty?

'I'm just coming, mom.'

From: Naddalin Black

Topic: Moans

Date: May 31, 2009 7:39 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Gotta go.

see yes, baby.

I rush into the hallway where Bob and my mom are waiting. My mother frowns.

'Honey - you feel good, you look a little flushed.'

'Mom, I'm fine.'

'You are lovely, honey.'

'Oh, it is Maury's dress. Do you like it?'

His frown deepened.

'Why are you wearing Maury's dress?'

Oh no.

'Well, I like this one and she doesn't,' I improvise quickly.

She gazes at me with insight as Bob oozes impatience with his drunk, hungry-looking dog.

'I'll take you shopping tomorrow,' she said.

'Oh, mom, you do not need to do that. I have plenty of clothes.'

'I can't do something for my own daughter, come on, Bob is hungry.'

'Too good,' Bob moaned, rubbing his stomach and assuming a fake expression of pain.

I laugh as he rolls his eyes, and we head for the door.

Later, when I am in the shower, cooling off under lukewarm water, I reflect on how much my mom has changed. Seeing her at dinner she was in her element, funny and affectionate, and among many friends at the golf club. Bob was warm and caring... They seem so good to each other. I am happy for her. It means I can stop worrying about her and questioning her decisions and putting husband number three dark days behind us both. Bob is a keeper. And she gives me good advice. When did it start?

Ever since I met Grayson. Why is that?

When I am done, I quickly dry off, eager to get back to Grayson. There is an email waiting for me, sent just after I left for dinner a few hours ago.

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Plagiarism

Date: May 31, 2009, 4:41 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

You stole my line.

And let me hang.

Enjoy your dinner.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Who are you to cry, thief?

Date: May 31, 2009 10:18 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sir, I think you will find that it was originally Jack's line.

Hang how?

Your Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Unfinished Business

Date: May 31, 2009 7:22 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Miss Black

You are back. You left so suddenly - just when things were getting interesting.

Jack is not very original. He will have stolen this line from someone.

How was dinner?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Unfinished business?

Date: May 31, 2009 10:26 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Le dinner was plentiful - you will be incredibly happy to hear, I have eaten too much.

Become interesting, how?

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Unfinished business - definitely

Date: May 31, 2009 7:30 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Are you deliberately obtuse you just asked me to unzip your dress?

-And-

I could not wait to do just that. I am also happy to hear that you are eating.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Well... there is always the weekend

Date: May 31, 2009 10:36 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Of course, I eat... It is only the uncertainty I feel around you that puts me off my food.

-And-

I would never be subconsciously obtuse, Mr. Maury.

You have surely understood this by now;)

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: I cannot wait

Date: May 31, 2009 7:40 PM

To: Naddalin Black

I will remember this, Miss Black, and no doubt use the knowledge to my advantage.

I am sorry to hear that I have cut you off from your food. I thought I was having a more lustful effect on you. This has been my experience and it was also very pleasant.

I cannot wait for the next time.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Linguistics of gymnastics

Date: May 31, 2009 10:36 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Have you played with the thesaurus again?

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Rumbled

Date: May 31, 2009 7:40 PM

To: Naddalin Black

You know me so well Miss Black.

I am having dinner with an old friend now so I will be driving.

(see yes, baby?)

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

What an old friend I did not think Grayson had any old friends except... her. I frown on the screen. Why does he still have to see her? A bold, green, bilious jealousy crosses me unexpectedly. I want to hit something, preferably Ms. MLF Stiffler's mom. Shutting down the laptop in anger, I climb into bed.

I should respond to her long email this morning, but suddenly I am too angry. Why cannot he see her for what she is - a pedophile I turn off the light, bubbling, gazing into the darkness. How dare she? How dare she go after a vulnerable teenager? Does she still do it? Why did they stop? Various scenarios filter through my

mind: he had had enough, so why is he still friends with her? having Grayson's children My subconscious rears its ugly head, peeping, and I am shocked and nauseous at the thought. Does Dr. LORENZO know her?

I struggle to get out of bed and turn the wicked machine back on. I am on a mission. I drummed my fingers impatiently as I waited for the blue screen to appear. I hit Google images and entered 'Grayson Murray' into the search engine. The screen is suddenly littered with pictures of Grayson: in a black tie, decent, jeez - the pictures of Sam from the Heathman, in his white shirt and flannel pants. How did they get on Internet Boy? He looks good.

I quickly move on: some with associates, then photo after image after glorious image of the most photogenic man I know, intimately. Do I know Grayson intimately, I know him sexually, and there is a lot more to discover out there. I know he is brooding, difficult, funny, cold, hot... damn, man is a walking mass of contradictions. I click on the next page. He is still alone in all these photos, and I remember Maury mentioning that she could not find any photos of him with a date, which prompted his gay question. Then on the third page, there is a picture of me with him at my graduation. His only photo with a woman, and that is me.

Holy cow! I am on Google! I watch us together. I look surprised by the camera, nervous, unbalanced. It was just before I agreed to try. For his part, Grayson looks incredibly handsome, calm, and composed, and he wears this tie. I look at him, one if

beautiful face, a beautiful face that could stare at Mrs. Damned MLF stifler's mom right now. I save the photo in my favorites and click on the eighteen screens... nothing. I will not find Ms. MLF stifler's mom on Google. But I need to know if he is with her. I type a quick email to Grayson.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Suitable dinner companions

Date: May 31, 2009 11:58 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Hope you and your friend had a very pleasant dinner.

Naddalin

PS Was it Mrs. MLF stifflers mom?

I hit send and hopelessly climb back into bed, determined to ask Grayson about his relationship with this woman. Part of me desperately wants to know more, and another part wants to forget that he ever told me. And my period has started, so I must remember to take my pill in the morning. I quickly program an alarm in my BlackBerry calendar. Putting it aside on the bedside table, I stretch out and finally drift into a worried sleep, wishing we were in the same town, within two thousand five hundred kilometers of each other.

After a morning of shopping and an afternoon back at the beach, my mom decreed that we should spend the evening in a bar. Ditching Bob on the TV, we find ourselves in the upscale bar at Savannah's most exclusive hotel. I am on my second Cosmopolitan. My mother is on her third. She offers more information on the fragile ego. It is very disconcerting.

'See, Naddalin, men think anything that comes out of a woman's mouth is a problem to be solved. Not a vague idea that we would like to talk about for a while and then forget. Men prefer action.'

'Mom, why are you telling me this?' I ask, not hiding my exasperation. She has been like this all day.

'Honey, you seem so lost. You never brought a boy home. You never even had a boyfriend when we were in Vegas. I thought something might develop with this guy you met in college, Sam.'

'Mom, Sam is just a friend.'

'I know, honey. But there is something going on, and I do not think you are telling me everything.' She looks at me, her face filled with maternal concern.

'I just needed some distance from Grayson to get my thoughts clear... that is it.'

'He tends to overwhelm me.'

'Overwhelm?'

'Yes. But I miss him.' I frown.

I have not heard from Grayson all day. No email, nothing. I am tempted to call him to see if he is okay. My worst fear is that he was in a car accident, my second biggest fear is that Ms. MLF Stiffler's mom will have her evil claws inside him again. I know it is irrational, but in what

Concerning her, I seem to have lost all sense of perspective.

'Honey, I have to visit the powder room.'

My mom's brief absence gives me another chance to check my BlackBerry. I have been surreptitiously trying to check emails all day. Finally - a response from Grayson!

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Dinner companions

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:40 p.m. EST

To: Naddalin Black

Yes, I had dinner with Mrs. MLF Stiffler's mom. She is just an old friend, Naddalin.

Hope to see you again. I miss you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

He was dining with her. My scalp stings as the adrenaline and fury rush through my body, all my worst fears come true, rushing through me. How could he be away for two days, and he runs away to this nasty bitch.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: FORMER dinner companions

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:42 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Ce

Is not just an old friend.

Did she find another teenager to get her teeth into?

Are you too old for her?

Is this the reason your relationship ended?

I press send on my mother's return.

'Naddalin, you are so pale. What happened?

I shake my head.

'Nothing. Let us have another drink,' I muttered quietly.

Her brow furrows, but she looks up and catches the attention of one of the waiters, gesturing to our glasses. He nods. He understands the universal language of 'same again, please. As she does, I take a glance at my BlackBerry.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Attention...

Date: June 1, 2009, 9:45 PM EST

To: Naddalin Black

This is not something I want to discuss via email.

How manyCosmopolites are you going to drink?

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit, he is here.

I look nervously around the bar but cannot see it.

'Naddalin, what is it? You look like you have seen a ghost.'

'It is Grayson, he is here.

'What really?' She also looks around the bar.

I neglected to mention Grayson's stalker tendencies to my mother.

I see him. My heart leaps, starting a jerky beat as it walks towards us. He is there - for me. My inner goddess jumped up, clapping from her lounge chair. Moving smoothly through the crowd, her hair reflects the burnished copper and red under the recessed halogens. Her bright gray eyes glow with - anger Tension Her mouth is set in a dark line, jaw strained. Oh, shit... no. I am so mad at him right now, and here he is. How can I be mad at him in front of my mother?

He arrives at our table looking at me suspiciously. He is dressed in the usual white linen shirt and jeans.

'Hi,' I squeaked, unable to hide my shock and fear of seeing him here in the flesh.

'Hi,' he replies, and leaning in, kisses my cheek, taking me by surprise.

'Grayson, this is my mother, Carla. My ingrained ways take over.'

He turns to greet my mother.

'Mrs. Adams, nice to meet you.'

How does he know his name? It gives her the breathtaking smile, patented by Grayson Maury, full-fledged, no prisoner. She has no hope. My mother's lower jaw practically touches the table. Damn it, catch mom. She takes his outstretched hand and they shake. My mother did not respond. Oh, a completely stunning speechlessness is genetic - I had no idea.

'Grayson,' she finally understood, gasping for air.

He smiled knowingly at her, his gray eyes twinkling. I squint at them both.

'What are you doing here?' My question seems more fragile than what I mean, and his smile disappears, his expression now kept. Glad to see him, but completely off balance, my anger over Ms. MLF stifler's mom simmers in my veins. I do not know if I want to yell at him or throw myself in his arms - but I do not think he would like either - and I want to know how long he has been watching us. I am also a little worried about the email I just sent him.

'I came to see you, of course.' He looks at me impassively. Oh, what is he thinking? 'I am staying at this hotel.'

'Are you staying here?' I sound like a sophomore on amphetamines, too high-pitched even for my ears.

'Well, yesterday you said you wished you were here.' He stops to try to gauge my reaction. 'We aim to please, Miss Black.' Her voice is calm without any trace of humor.

Damn - Is he angry? Ms. MLF stifler's mom is commenting? Or the fact that I am on my third, soon-to-be fourth Cosmo. My mom is watching us worriedly.

'Don't you want to join us for a drink, Grayson?' She waves to the waiter who is by her side in a nanosecond.

'I'll have a gin and tonic,' said Grayson. 'Hendricks if you have it or Bombay Sap-phire. Cucumber with Hendricks, lime with Mumbai (Bombay).'

Damn... only Grayson could cook a meal by ordering a drink.

'And two more Cosmos please,' I add, looking at Grayson anxiously. I drink with my mom - he cannot be mad about it.

'Please take a chair, Grayson.

'Thank you, Mrs. Adams.

Grayson pulls up a chair nearby and sits Billie fully next to me.

'So are you just staying at the hotel where we drink?' I ask, trying to keep my tone light.

'Or, you just happen to be drinking at the hotel I'm staying at,' Grayson replies.

'I just finished dinner, came here, and saw you. I was thinking distracted about your most recent email, and I looked, and there you are. Quite a coincidence, eh? He tilts his head to one side and I see a hint of a smile. Thank goodness we might be able to save the evening.'

'My mom and I were shopping this morning and on the beach this afternoon. We opted for a few cocktails tonight,' I mumble, feeling I owe him some sort of explanation.

'Did you buy this top?' He nods to my brand new green silk camisole, 'The color looks good on you. And you have sunk in. You look lovely.'

I blushed, speechless at his compliment.

'Well, I was going to visit you tomorrow. But there you are.'

He reaches out, takes my hand, and squeezes it gently, running his thumb over my knuckles back and forth... and I feel the familiar pull. The electric charge zaps under my skin under the light pressure of his thumb, pulling into my bloodstream and pulsing around my body, heating everything in its path. It has been more than two days since I saw him.

Oh my... I want it. My breathing is blocked. I blink at him, smiling shyly, and see a smile play on his beautiful sculpted lips.

'I thought I would surprise you. But as always, Naddalin, you surprise me by being here.'

I glance at mum who is looking at Grayson... yes who is watching! Stop it, mom. As if it were an exotic creature, never seen before. I mean, I know I have never had a boyfriend, and Grayson only qualifies as such for ease of reference - but is it so amazing that I can attract a man? This man Yes, frankly - look at him - my subconscious slams. Oh shut up! Who invited you to the party, I frown at my mom - but she does not seem to notice.

'I do not want to interrupt your time with your mother. I will have a drink and then retire. I have work to do,' he says sincerely.

'Grayson, nice to finally meet you,' Mom intervenes, finally finding her voice.

'Naddalin has talked a lot about you.'

He smiles at her.

'Really?' He raises an eyebrow at me, an amused expression on his face, and I blush again.

The waiter arrives with our drinks.

'Hendricks, sir,' he said with a triumphant flourish.

'Thank you,' Grayson whispers in thanks.

I nervously sip my latest Cosmo.

'How long have you been in Georgia, Grayson?' Mom asks.

'Until Friday, Mrs. Adams.'

'Would you like to have dinner with us tomorrow night, and please call me Carla.'

'I would love to, Carla.'

'Excellent. If you will excuse me, I must visit the powder room.'

Mom... you just got it. I watch her desperately as she gets up and walks away, leaving us alone together.

'So you're mad at me for having dinner with an old friend.' Grayson turns his hot, suspicious gaze on me, bringing my hand to his lips and gently kissing each knuckle.

Damn, does he want to do this now?

'Yes,' I whisper as my heated blood rushes through me.

'Our sex was over a long time ago, Naddalin,' he whispers. 'I do not want anyone other than you. Haven't you understood that yet?'

I blink at him.

'I consider her a pedophile, Grayson. I hold my breath waiting for his reaction.'

Grayson bleached.

'It is overly critical. It was not like that,' he whispers, shocked. He lets go of my hand. Judicial?

'Oh, how was it then?' I ask. The Cosmos makes me brave.

He frowns, bewildered. I continue.

'She took advantage of a vulnerable fifteen year old boy. If you had been a fifteen year old girl and Ms. MLF stiflers mom was a Mr. MLF stiflers mom, tempting you into a BDSM lifestyle, it would have been nice if it were Mia, say?'

He gasps and scowls at me.

'Naddalin, it was not like that.'

I stare at him.

'Okay, I didn't feel like that,' he continues quietly. 'She was a force for good.'

'What I needed'

'I do not understand.' It is my turn to look puzzled.

'Naddalin, your mother will be back soon.' I am not comfortable talking about it now. Later. If you do not want me here, I have a plane waiting at Hilton Head.

I can go.

He is mad at me... no.

'No - do not go. Please. Glad you are here. I am just trying to make it clear to you. I am angry that as soon as I left you had dinner with her. Think about it. the way you are when I approach Sam. Sam is a good friend. I have never had sex with him. As you and her,' I stop, unwilling to take that thought any further.

'You are jealous?' He looks at me, stunned, and his eyes soften slightly warming, 'Yes, and angry at what she did to you.'

'Naddalin, she helped me, that is all I am going to say about it. And as for your jealousy, put yourself in my place. I have not had to justify my actions to anyone for the past seven years.'

Not a single person. I do what I want, Naddalin. I like my autonomy. I did not go to see Ms.

'MLF stifler's mom to get on your nerves. I went there because now and then we have dinner. She is a friend and a business partner.'

Business partner This is news.

He looks at me, assessing my expression.

'Yes, we are business partners. The sex is over between us. It has been years.'

'Why did your relationship end?'

Her mouth narrows and her eyes shine.

'Her husband found out.'

Holy shit!

'Can we talk about it another time - in a more private place?' he growls.

'I don't think you'll ever convince me that she's not some kind of pedophile.'

'I do not think of her that way. I never did. Now that is enough!' he slams.

'Did you like him?'

'How are you both doing?' My mother came back, invisible to either of us.

I put a fake smile on my face as Grayson and I lean back hastily... guiltily.

She is looking at me.

'Alright, mom.'

Grayson sips his drink, looking at me closely, his expression kept. What is he thinking? Did he love her? I think if he loved him I would lose him a lot.

'Well ladies, I will leave you to your party.'

No... no... he cannot let me hang like that.

'Please put these drinks on my bill, room number 612. I will call you tomorrow morning, Naddalin.' Until tomorrow, Carla.

'Oh, it's so nice to hear someone use your full name.'

'Beautiful name for a beautiful girl,' Grayson whispers, squeezing her outstretched hands, and she is simmering.

Oh mama, - and you Brute I stand up, looking at him, begging him to answer my question, and he kisses my cheek, chastely.

'See yeah, baby,' he whispers in my ear.' Then he left.

Damn control-freak-bastard. My anger is coming back in force. I collapse in my chair and turn to face my mother.

'Well, hit me with a feather, Naddalin. It is a trap. I do not know what is going on between you two. You need to talk to each other. Phew - the UST here is unbearable. It is theatrically fanned.

'MOM!'

'Go talk to him.'

'I cannot. I came here to see you.'

'Naddalin, you came here because you are confused about this boy. Obviously the two of you are crazy for each other. You need to talk to him. He just traveled three thousand kilometers to see you, for heaven's sake. And you know how horrible it is to steal.'

I rinse. I did not tell him about his private plane.

'What?' She is making fun of me.

'He's got his own plane,' I mumble, embarrassed, and he is only two thousand five hundred miles, Mom.

Why am I embarrassed? His eyebrows are raised.

'Wow,' she mumbles. 'Naddalin, something is going on between you two. I have been trying to understand since you got here. But the only way to solve any

problem is to discuss it with him. You can do whatever you want - but until you talk, you are not going to Pittsburgh where.

I frown at my mother.

'Naddalin, honey, you have always tended to over-analyze everything. Go with your instincts. What does that tell you, my darling?

I look at my fingers.

'I think I'm in love with him,' I mumble.

'I know honey. And he is with you.'

'No!'

'Yes, Naddalin. Hell - what do you need? A flashing neon sign on her forehead?'

I am speechless and tears sting the corner of my eyes.

'Naddalin, honey. Do not Cry.

'I don't think he likes me.'

'I do not care how rich you are, you do not drop everything and get on your private plane and cross a whole continent just for afternoon tea. See it! It is a beautiful place, very romantic. It is also neutral territory.'

I squirm under his gaze. I want to go and no.

'Honey, do not feel like you must come back with me. I want you to be happy - and right now I think the key to your happiness is upstairs in room 712. If you need to come back later, the key is under the Yucca plant on the porch. If you stay - well... you are a big girl now. Just be safe.'

I rinse the stars and red stripes. Damn it, mom.

'Let's finish our Cosmos first.'

'This is my daughter, Naddalin. She smiles.'

I timidly knock on room 712 and wait. Grayson opens the door. He is in his cell. He blinks at me in total surprise, then holds the door wide open and gestures for me to enter his room.

'All the layoffs are over?... What about the cost?...' Grayson hisses between his teeth. 'Sheesh... that was a costly mistake... and Lucas...'

I look around the room. He is in a suit, like the Heathman. The furniture here is ultra-modern, very now. All muted dark purples and golds with bronze stars on the walls. Grayson walks over to the dark wood unit and opens a door to reveal a minibar. He indicates that I should help myself, then walks around the room.

It is to stop hearing his conversation. I shrug my shoulders. He did not stop his call when I walked into his office that time. I hear water running... he fills a bath. I use orange juice. He returns to the room.

'Ask Andrea to send me the diagrams. Barney said he solved the problem...'

Grayson laughs. 'No, Friday... There is a lot here I am interested in... Yes, ask Bill to call... No, tomorrow... I want to see what Georgia has to offer if we move in.'

Grayson does not take his eyes off me. Handing me a drink, he shows me an ice bucket.

'If their motives are attractive enough... I think we should give it some thought, although I am not sure about the damn heat here... I agree that Detroit has its advantages too, and that is more. cool... 'His face darkened momentarily... Why 'Call Bill. Tomorrow... Not too soon.' He hangs up and looks at me, his face unreadable, and the silence stretches between us. Okay... My turn to speak.

'You didn't answer my question,' I whisper.

'No, I didn't,' he said softly, his gray eyes wide and cautious.

'No you didn't answer my question or didn't you like it?'

He crosses his arms and leans against the wall, and a small smile plays on his lips.

'What are you doing here, Naddalin?'

'I have just told you.'

He takes a deep breath.

'No, I didn't like him.' He frowns, amused but puzzled.

I cannot believe I am holding my breath. I collapse like an old cloth bag when I release it. Well, thank you heaven for that. How would I feel if he loved the witch?

'You're more of the green-eyed goddess, Naddalin. Who would have thought?'

'Are you kidding me, Mr. Maury?'

'I would not dare.' He shakes his head solemnly, but he has a nasty glint in his eyes.

'Oh, I think you would, and you do - often.'

He smirked as I returned the words he had already said to me. His eyes darken.

'Please stop biting your lip. You are in my room, I have not looked at you for almost three days, and I have come a long way to see you. Her tone became soft and sensual.

His BlackBerry is buzzing, distracting us both, and he turns it off without looking to see who it is. My breathing is blocked. I know where it is going... but we are supposed to talk.

He takes a step towards me with his sexy predatory look.

'I want you, Naddalin. Now. And you want me. Therefore you are here.'

'I really wanted to know,' I whisper in defense.

'Well, now that you do, are you coming or going?'

I blush as he stops in front of me.

'I'm coming,' I whisper, looking at him anxiously.

'Oh, I hope so.' He looks at me. 'You were so mad at me,' he hisses.

'Yes.'

'I cannot remember anyone other than my family who was ever mad at me.
I like it.'

He runs his fingers over my cheek. Oh my God, her closeness, her delicious Grayson smell. We are supposed to talk, but my heart beats hard, my blood sings as it runs through my body, desire, pooling, unfolding... everywhere. Grayson leans down and runs his nose down my shoulder and down to the base of my ear, his fingers crawling through my hair. I whisper.

'Later.'

'There are so many things I want to say.'

'Me too.'

He plants a soft kiss under my earlobe as his fingers tighten in my hair. Pulling my head back, he exposes my throat to his lips. His teeth brush my chin and he kisses my throat.

'I want you,' he hisses.

I moan and reach out and grab his arms.

'Are you bleeding? He continues to kiss me.'

Holy shit. Does nothing escape him?

'Yes,' I whisper, embarrassed.

'Do you have cramps?

'No.' I rinse. Whore...

He stops and looks at me.

'Did you take your pill?'

'Yes.' How mortifying is that?

'Let's go take a bath.'

Oh?

He takes my hand and leads me into the bedroom. It is dominated by a super king-size bed with elaborate curtains. But we do not stop there. He takes me to the bathroom which is made up of two rooms, all aquamarine, and white limestone. It is huge - In the second room, a sunken tub, large enough for four with stone steps leading up to it, slowly fills with water. The steam slowly rises above the foam and I notice a stone seat all around.

The candles twinkle on the side. Wow... he did it all over the phone.

'Do you have a hair tie?

I blink at him, dig into my jeans pocket, and pull off a hair elastic.

'Put your hair up,' he orders softly. I do what he asks.

It is hot and sultry next to the bath, and my tank top is starting to stick. He leans over and turns off the tap. Leading me back to the first part of the bathroom, he stands behind me as we face the wall mirror above the two glass sinks.

'Raise your arms,' he breathes. I do as I am told, and he lifts my tank top over my head so that I am topless standing in front of him. Without taking his eyes off mine, he reaches out and undoes the button on the top of my jeans and the zipper.

'I'll have you in the bathroom, Naddalin.'

Leaning down, he kisses me on the neck. I move my head to one side and give it easier access. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans, he slowly slides them down my legs, digging behind me as he pulls them with my panties to the floor.

'Get out of your jeans.'

Grabbing the edge of the sink, that is exactly what I am doing. I am now naked, looking at myself, and he is kneeling behind me. He kisses me and then gently bites my behind, making me gasp. He gets up and looks at me once more in the mirror. I try to stay still, ignoring my natural inclination to cover myself up. He plays his hand on my stomach, the span of his hand going from hip to hip.

'Look at you. You are so beautiful,' he whispers. 'See how you feel.' He squeezes both of my hands in his, his palms against the backs of my hands, his fingers

between mine so that my fingers are spread apart. He puts my hands on my stomach. 'Feel how soft your skin is.'

Her voice is soft and low. He moves my hands in a slow circle then upward towards my breasts. 'Feel how full your breasts are.' He holds my hands so that they take my breasts.

He gently strokes my nipples with his thumbs repeatedly.

I moan between parted lips and arch my back so that my breasts fill my palms. He squeezes my nipples between our thumbs, pulling them gently so that they lengthen further. I watch with fascination the free creature writhing in front of me. Oh, that feels good. I moan and close my eyes, not wanting to see this lustful woman in the mirror collapse under her own hands... her hands... feel my skin like him, feel how hot she is - just his touch, and his calm, gentle, commanding.

'That's right, baby,' he whispers.

It guides my easily the sides of my body, from my waist to my hips and through my pubic hair. He slides his leg between mine, spreading my feet further, widening my position, and running my hands over my cock, one hand at a time, in turn, establishing a rhythm. It is so erotic. I am a puppet and he is the expert puppeteer.

'Watch yourself shine, Naddalin,' he whispered, dragging kisses and soft bites down my shoulder. I moan. Suddenly he lets go.

'Continue,' he orders, and pulls back, looking at me.

I rub myself. No, I want him to do it. It is not the same thing. I am lost without him. He pulls his shirt over his head and quickly takes off his jeans.

'Would you rather I do that?' His gray gaze burns mine in the mirror.

'Oh yes... please,' I breathe.

He wraps his arms around me again and takes my hands once more, continuing the sensual caress through my cock, over my clit. His chest hair rubs against me, his erection pressed against me. Oh soon... please. He bites the back of his neck and I close my eyes, enjoying the myriad sensations; my neck, my groin... the feel of him behind me.

He stops abruptly and spins me around, circling my wrists with one hand, trapping my hands behind me, and pulling on my Pittsburgh tail with the other. I am close to him, and he kisses me wildly, ravaging my mouth with his. Holding me in place.

His breathing is irregular and matches mine.

'When did you start your period, Naddalin?' he asks suddenly, looking at me. 'Um... yesterday,' I mumbled in my overly excited state.

'Good.' He frees me and turns me around.

'Hang on to the sink,' he orders and pulls my hips back again as he did in the playroom, so I lean over.

He stretches his hand between my legs and pulls on the blue string... what! And... gently pull out my tampon and throw it in the next toilet. Holy shit. Sweet mother of all... Fuck.

-And-

Then he is in me... ah! Skin to skin... moving slowly at first... easily, testing me, pushing me... oh my God. I clutch at the sink, panting, forcing myself back on him, feeling him inside me. Oh, the sweet agony... his hands squeeze my hips. He sets a punishing rhythm - in, out, and he reaches out and finds my clit, massaging me... oh jeez. I can feel myself speeding up.

'That's right, baby,' he squeaks as he rubs against me, tilting his hips, and that is enough to send me flying, flying high.

Whoa... and I come, loudly, clutching for Dear, life on the sink as I spiral down through my orgasm, everything spins and squeezes at once. He follows me, hugging me tight, front on my back as he cumms and calls my name like it is a litany for a prayer.

'Oh, Naddalin! His breathing is irregular in my ear, in perfect cooperation with mine. 'Oh, baby, will I ever get enough of you?' He whispers.

Will it always be like this? So overwhelming, so devouring, so confusing, and alluring. I wanted to talk, but now I am exhausted and dizzy from his lovemaking and I wonder if I will ever get enough of him.

We slowly fall to the floor, and he wraps his arms around me, trapping me. I am curled up on his knees, my head against his chest, as we both calm down. Very subtly, I inhale its sweet and intoxicating Grayson scent. I must not muzzle. I must not muzzle. I repeat the mantra in my head - even though I am so tempted to do it. I want to raise my hand and draw patterns in his chest hair with my fingers... but I resist, knowing that he would hate it if I do. We are both quiet, lost in our thoughts. I am lost in him... lost for him.

I remember- I have my period.

'I'm bleeding,' I whisper.

'I don't mind,' he hisses.

'I noticed.' I cannot help the dryness in my voice.

He tenses up slightly.

'Does it bother you?' He asks softly.

Does it bother me? It should... if not, it does not. I lean back and look at him, and he looks at me, his eyes a soft cloudy gray.

'Not at all.'

He smiles.

'Good. Let us take a bath.'

He unfolds around me, placing me on the floor as he stands. As he does so, I notice the little round white scars on his chest again. It is not chickenpox, I think distractedly. Billie said he was hardly affected. Holy shit... they must be burnt.

Burns of what I whitewash upon realization, shock, and repulsion coursing through me.

MLF stifler's mom cigarettes, her birth mother, who did this to her There's a reasonable explanation, and I am overreacting - a wild hope blooms in my chest - I hope I am wrong.

'What is that?' Grayson's face is wide-eyed with alarm.

'Your scars,' I whisper. 'They are not chickenpox.'

I watch as in a split second he closes, his stance changing from relaxed, calm, and at ease, to defensive - angry, even. He frowns, his face darkens, and his mouth presses into a thin, hard line.

'No, they are not,' he snaps, but he does not elaborate further. He gets up, holds out his hand, and pulls me back to my feet.

'Do not look at me like that.' His voice is colder and rumbling as he lets go of my hand.

I blushed and chastised and stared at my fingers, and I know, I know someone smashed cigarettes on Grayson. I feel sick.

'Did she do that?' I whisper before I can stop.

He does not say anything, so I must watch him. He looks at me.

'Her Mrs. MLF stifler's mom It is not an animal, Naddalin. Of course, she did not. I do not understand why you think you must demonize her.'

He is standing there, naked, gloriously naked, with my blood on him... and we finally have this conversation. And I am naked too - neither of us has nowhere to hide except the bath. I take a deep breath, walk past him, and descend into the water.

It is deliciously warm, soothing, and deep. I melt into the scented foam and watch it, hiding among the bubbles.

'I just wonder what you would be like if you had not met her. If she had not introduced you to your... uh, lifestyle.'

He sighs and goes down into the tub in front of me, his jaw clenched in tension, his eyes frozen. As Billie fully submerged his body under the water, he was careful not to touch me. Jeez - did I drive him so crazy?

He stares at me impassively, his face unreadable, saying nothing. Again, silence stretches between us, but I take my advice. It is your turn Maury - I am not giving in this time.

My subconscious is nervous, biting my nails anxiously - it could go either way. Grayson and I look at each other, but I do not back down. Finally, after what seems like a millennium, he shakes his head and smiles.

'I probably would have followed my birth mother's path, without Ms. MLF stiflers mom.'

Oh! I blink at him. Crack addict or whore Both?

'She loved me in a way that I found... acceptable,' he adds with a shrug.

What does that mean?

'Acceptable?' I whisper.

'Yes.' He stares at me. 'She distracted me from the destructive path I found myself following. It is exceedingly difficult to grow up in a perfect family when you are not perfect.'

Oh no. My mouth is dry as I digest his words. He looks at me, his expression was, unfathomable. He will not tell me more. How frustrating. Inside I am in shock - he seems so full of self-loathing. And Mrs. MLF stifler's mom loved him. Holy shit... is she still?

I feel like I have been kicked in the stomach.

'Does she still love you?'

'I don't think so, not like that.' He frowns as if he had not thought of the idea. 'I keep telling you that it was a long time ago. It is in the past. I could not change that even if I wanted to, which I do not do. She saved me from me. -even.' He is exasperated and runs a wet hand through his hair. 'I never discussed it with anyone.' He stops, 'Except Dr

LORENZO, of course. And the only reason I am talking to you about this now is that I want you to trust me.

'I trust you, but I want to know you better, and every time I try to talk to you, you distract me. There are so many things I want to know.'

'Oh please, Naddalin. What do you want to know, what should I do?' His eyes are shining, and although he does not raise his voice, I know he is trying to contain his temper.

I quickly look at my hands, clear under the water as the bubbles have started to disperse.

'I am just trying to figure out, you are a puzzle. Unlike anyone, I have met before.'

I am glad you tell me what I want to know.

Damn - it is the Cosmopolitans that make me brave, but suddenly I cannot stand the distance between us. I move in the water beside him and lean against him so that we touch each other, skin to skin. He tensed up and looked at me suspiciously as if I might bite. Well, that is a turnaround. My inner goddess watches him in silent and surprised speculation.

'Please don't be mad at me,' I whisper.

'I am not mad at you, Naddalin. I am just not used to this kind of conversation - this investigation. I only have that with Dr. LORENZO and with -' He stops and frowns. eyebrows.

'With her. Mrs. MLF stiflers mom. Are you talking to her?' I invite him, trying to control my temper.

'Yes.'

'What about?'

He moves around the tub so he is facing me, causing the water to run sideways onto the floor. He puts his arm around my shoulders, resting on the edge of the tub.

'Persistent isn't it?' he whispers, a trace of irritation in his voice. 'Life, the universe - business. Naddalin, Mrs. R and I take a step back. We can discuss everything.'

'Me?' I whisper.

'Yes.' Gray eyes watch me intently.

I bite my lower lip, trying to stop the sudden surge of anger that arises.

'Why are you talking about me?' I try not to sound why and irritable, but I cannot. I know I should stop. I push him too hard. My subconscious has its Edvard Munch face again.

'I've never met anyone like you, Naddalin.'

'What does this mean for someone who just didn't automatically sign your papers, no questions asked?'

He shakes his head.

'I need advice.'

'And you are taking Mrs. Paedo's advice?' I crack. The grip on my temper is more hesitant than I thought.

'Naddalin - enough,' he leans back severely, his eyes narrowing.

I do something risky and head into danger. 'Or I will put you on my knees.

I have no sexual or romantic interest in her. She is a Dear, and appreciated friend and business partner. That is all. We have a past, a shared history, which has been monumental for me, even though it messed up her marriage - but that aspect of our relationship is over.'

Jeez - another part that I just cannot figure out. She was also married. How did they get out of it for so long?

'And your parents never knew that?'

'No,' he growls. 'I told you.'

-And-

I know that is it. I cannot ask him any more questions about her because he will lose her with me.

'Have you finished?' he slams.

'For the moment.'

He takes a deep breath and visibly relaxes in front of me as if a heavyweight is lifted off his shoulders or something.

'Good - my turn,' he mumbles, and his gaze turns to steel, speculative. 'You did not reply to my email.'

I rinse. Oh, I hate the spotlight on me, and it looks like he is going to get angry every time we have a discussion. I shake my head. That is what he thinks of my questions, he is not used to being questioned. The thought is revealing, distracting, and bewildering.

'I was going to answer. But now you are here.'

'Would you rather I wasn't?' he breathes, his expression impassive again.

'No, I'm happy,' I whisper.

'Good.' He gives me a sincere and relieved smile. 'I am happy to be here too - despite your interrogation. So while it is okay to grill me, you think you can claim some sort of diplomatic immunity just because I stole this all the way for you. see. I am not buying it, Miss Black. I want to know how you feel.'

Oh no...

'I told you. I am glad you are here. Thanks for coming all this way,' I said weakly.

'It is my pleasure, Miss Black. His eyes shine as he leans in and kisses me softly.'

I feel myself responding automatically. The water is still hot, the bathroom is still damp.

He stops and backs up, looking at me.

'No. I want some answers before I continue.'

More There is still this word. And he wants answers... answers that I do not have a secret past - I do not have a heartbreak childhood. What could he want to know about me that he does not already know?

I sigh, resigned.

'What do you want to know?'

'Well, what do you think of our future arrangement, to begin with.'

I blink at him. Truth or dare time - my subconscious, inner goddess looks at herself nervously. Damn, let us go for the truth.

'I do not think I can do it for a long time. A whole weekend being someone I am not.' I blush and look at my hands.

He lifts my chin, and he smiles at me, amused.

'No, I don't think you could either.'

-And-

Part of me feels slightly offended and challenged.

'Are you kidding me?'

'Yes, but in a good way,' he said with a small smile.

He leans in and kisses me softly, briefly.

'You're not a big submissive,' he breathes, holding my chin, his eyes dancing with humor.

I look at him in shock, then I burst out laughing - and he joins me.

'Maybe I don't have a good teacher.'

He sniffs the air.

'Maybe. I should be stricter with you.' He tilts his head to the side and gives me a shrewd smile.

I swallow. Damn it, no. But at the same time, my muscles are contracting deliciously deep inside.

It is his way of showing he cares. The only way he can show he cares - I realize that. He looks at me, gauges my reaction.

'Was it that bad when I spanked you the first time?'

I look at him, blinking my eyes. Was it so bad that I remember feeling confused by my reaction? It hurt, but not so much in retrospect. He said repeatedly that it was more in my head. And the second time... well, it was good... hot.

'No, not really,' I whisper.

'Is that more the idea?' he invites.

'I guess. Feeling pleasure when you are not supposed to.'

'I remember feeling the same. It takes time to understand.'

Good heavens. It was when he was a child.

'You can always be sure of yourself, Naddalin. Remember this. And, if you follow the rules, which fulfill a deep need in me to be in control and to protect you, then maybe we can find a way forward.. '

'Why do you need to control me?'

'Because it fills a need in me that was not met in my formative years.'

'So is this a form of therapy?'

'I didn't think of it like that, but yeah, I guess it does.'

This is what I can understand. CA will help.

'But, here is the thing - one moment you say do not challenge me, the next you say you like to be challenged.'

He looks at me for a moment, then frowns.

'I can see that. But you are doing well so far.'

'But at what personal cost I am bound here.'

'I love that you are tied in knots,' he smiles.

'That's not what i meant!' I splash her with exasperation.

He looks at me, arching an eyebrow.

'Did you just splash me?'

'Yes.' Holy shit... that look.

'Oh, Miss Black. He grabs me and pulls me onto his knees, spilling water on the floor. I think we've said enough about it yet.'

He squeezes his hands on either side of my head and kisses me. Deeply. Own my mouth. Tilting my head... controlling myself. I moaned against his lips. This is what he likes. That is what he is so good at. Everything is on fire inside of me and my fingers are in his hair, holding him against me, and I kiss him back and say I want you too, the only way I knowledge. He moaned, moving me so that I straddled him, kneeling on him, his erection beneath me. He pulls back and looks at me, hooded eyes, shining and lustful. I drop my hands to grip the edge of the tub but he grabs both of my wrists and pulls my hands behind my back, holding them together in one hand.

'I'm going to have you now,' he whispers and lifts me to hover over him.

'Ready?' he breathes.

'Yes,' I whispered, and he walked over to him, slowly, deliciously slowly... filling me...

looking at me as he picked me up.

I moan as I close my eyes and revel in the feeling, the stretch of fullness. He flexes his hips, and I gasp, leaning forward, resting my forehead against his.

'Please let my hands go,' I whisper.

'Don't touch me,' he pleads, and releasing my wrists, he grabs my hips.

Gripping the rim of the tub, I move up and down slowly, opening my eyes to look at him. He looks at me. Her mouth opened slightly, her breathing stopped, stilted - her tongue between her teeth. He looks so... hot. We are wet and slippery and we move against each other. I lean in and kiss her. He closes his eyes. Tentatively, I bring my hands to her head and run my fingers through her hair, without removing my lips from her mouth. This is allowed. He likes that. I like this. And we move together. I pull his hair back, tilt my head back and deepen the kiss, straddling him - faster, picking up the pace. I moaned against his mouth. He starts to lift me faster and faster... holding my hips. Kiss me back. We are wet mouth and tongue, tangled hair, and moving hips. any feeling... all-consuming again.

I am close... I am starting to recognize this delicious tightening... accelerator. And the water... it swirls around us, our whirlwind, a touching whirlpool as our movements become more frenetic... tossing around, mirroring what is going on inside me... and I do not care.

I love this man. I love his passion, the effect I have on him. I love that he flew so far to see me. I love that he cares about me... he cares. It is so unexpected, so fulfilling.

He is mine and I am his.

'That's right, baby,' he breathes.

-And-

I come, my orgasm tears me apart, a turbulent, passionate climax that devours me entirely. And suddenly Grayson crushes me against him... his arms wrapped around my back as he finds his release.

'Naddalin, baby!' he cries, and it is a wild invocation, stirring and touching the depths of my soul.

We are lying looking at each other, gray eyes in the blue, face to face, in the super king-size bed, both hugging our pillows to our foreheads. Naked. Do not touch. Just watch and admire, covered by the sheet.

'Do you want to sleep?' Grayson asks, his voice soft. He is handsome; the mix of colors in her lively hair against the white Egyptian cotton pillowcase, the gray, smoldering, expressive eyes. He looks worried.

14

'No, I'm not tired.' I feel strangely energetic. It was so good to talk - I do not want to stop.

'What do you want to do?' He asks.

'Speak.'

He smiles.

'About what?'

'Thing.'

'What thing?'

'You.'

'And me?'

'What is your favorite movie?'

He smiles.

'Today is- 'The Piano."

Her smile is contagious.

'Sure. Crazy about me. Such a sad and exciting score, which you can no doubt play. So many accomplishments, Mr. Maury.'

'And the biggest is you, Miss Black.'

'So I'm number seventeen.'

He frowns, not understanding.

'Seventeen?'

'Number of women you... have had sex with.'

Her lips curl up, her eyes shining in disbelief.

'Not exactly.'

'You said fifteen,' My confusion is obvious.

'I was referring to the number of women in my playroom. I thought that was what you meant. You did not ask me how many women I had slept with.'

'Oh.' Holy shit... there is more... how I am speechless. 'Vanilla?'

'No. You are my only vanilla conquest,' he shakes his head, still smiling at me.

Why does he find it funny and why am I smiling at him like an idiot?

'I cannot give you a number. I did not put any notches in the bed post or anything.'

'What are we talking about - tens, hundreds... thousands?' My eyes get crazier and crazier as the numbers go up.

'Dozens. We are in the tens, please.'

'All submissive?'

'Yes.'

'Stop smiling at myself,' I scolded him softly, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

'I cannot. You are funny.'

'funny, strange or funny ha ha?'

'A bit of both I think.' His words reflect mine.

'That's a damn cheek, coming from you.'

He leans in and kisses the tip of my nose.

'This will shock you, Naddalin. Ready?'

I nod, my eyes wide, still with the stupid smile on my face.

'All submissive in training when I was training. There are places in and around New York that you can go and practice. Learn how to do what I do,' he says.

What?

'Oh.' I blink at him.

'Yeah, I paid for sex, Naddalin.'

'There's nothing to be proud of,' I mumble haughtily. 'And you are right... I am deeply shocked. And I think I cannot shock you.'

'You were wearing my underwear.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yes.' My inner goddess is pole vaulting over the fifteen-foot bar.

'You didn't wear your panties to meet my parents.'

'Did that shock you?

'Yes.'

Hell, the bar went down to sixteen feet.

'It looks like I can only shock you in the underwear department.'

'You told me you were a virgin. It is the biggest shock I have ever had.'

'Yes, your face was a picture, a Kodak moment.' I laugh.

'You let me work you with a riding crop.'

'Did that shock you?'

'Yeah.'

I smile.

'Well, I can let you do it again.'

'Oh, I hope so, Miss Black. This weekend?'

'Okay,' I agree, shyly.

'Okay?'

'Yes. I will return to the Red Pain Room.'

'You say my name.'

'Does that shock you?'

'The fact that I like it shocks me.'

'Grayson.'

He smiles.

'I want to do something tomorrow.' Her eyes shine with excitement.

'What?'

'A surprise. For you.' Her voice is low and soft.

I raise an eyebrow and stifle a yawn at the same time.

'Am I boring you, Miss Black?' His tone is Naddalindonic.

'Never.'

He leans in and kisses me softly on my lips.

'Sleep,' he orders, then turns off the light.

-And-

In that quiet moment, as I close my eyes, exhausted and full, I am in the eye of the storm. And despite everything he said, and what he did not say, I do not think I have ever been happier.

Grayson stands in a cage with steel bars. Dressed in his soft, ripped jeans, his chest and feet are bare to his mouth and he looks at me. His smile of private joke was etched on his handsome face and his gray eyes. In his hands, he holds a bowl of strawberries.

He walks with athletic Billie in the front of the cage, watching me intently. Holding a ripe, plump strawberry, he extends his hand through the bars.

'Eat,' he says, his tongue stroking the front of his palate as he utters the 'T'.

I try to walk towards him, but I am tied, held by an invisible force around my wrist, holding myself. Let me go.

'Come on, eat,' he said, smiling his delicious twisted smile.

I pull and pull... let me go! I want to scream and screaming, but no sound comes out. I am dumb. It stretches a little more, and the strawberry is on my lips.

'Eat, Naddalin. Her mouth forms my name, sensually lingering over each syllable.

I open my mouth and bite, the cage disappears and my hands are free. I reach out to touch him, rubbing my fingers through his chest hair.

'Naddalin'.

No, I moan.

'Come on baby.'

No, I want to touch you.

'To wake up.'

No, please. My eyes involuntarily open for a split second. I am in bed and someone is rubbing my ear.

'Wake up, baby,' he whispers, and the effect of his soft voice spreads like hot melted caramel through my veins.

It is Grayson. Damn, it is still dark, and the images of him from my dream linger, baffling and tantalizing in my head.

'Oh... no,' I moaned. I want to get back to his chest, back to my dream. Why is he waking me up?

It is the middle of the night, at least that is what it feels like. Holy shit. Does he want sex - now?

'It is time to get up, baby. I will turn on the nightlight.' Her voice is calm.

'No,' I moan.

'I want to chase the dawn with you,' he says, kissing my face, my eyelids, the tip of my nose, my mouth, and I open my eyes. The night light is on. 'Hello pretty,'

He whispers.

I moan and he smiles.

'You are not early in the morning,' he whispers.

Through the haze of light, I squint and see Grayson leaning over me, smiling. Amused.

Amused by me. Dressed! In black.

'I thought you wanted sex,' I growl.

'Naddalin, I still want to have sex with you. It is heartwarming to know that you feel the same way,' he said dryly.

I watch him as my eyes adjust to the light, but he still looks amused... thank goodness.

'Of course it does, but not when it's so late.'

'It is not late, it is early. Come on, go ahead. We are going out. I am going to do a sex rain test.'

'I was having such a beautiful dream,' I moan.

'Dream about what?' He asks patiently.

'You.' I am blushing.

'What was I doing this time?'

'I'm trying to give myself strawberries.'

His lips quiver with a hint of a smile.

'Dr. LORENZO could spend a day in the field with that. Get up - get dressed. Do not bother to take a shower, we can do that later.'

We!

I sit up, and the sheet sinks to my waist, revealing my body. He gets up to make room for me, his eyes were dark.

'What time is it?'

'5:30 in the morning.'

'Looks like 3:01 in the morning'

'We do not have much time. I will let you sleep if possible. Come on.'

'Can't I take a shower?'

He sighs.

'If you take a shower, I want one with you, and you and I know what's going to happen then - the day will be fine.' Come.

He is excited. As a little boy, he is iridescent with anticipation and excitement. It makes me smile.

'What are we doing?'

'It is a surprise. I told you.'

I cannot help but smile at him.

'Okay.' I climb out of bed and search for my clothes. Of course, they are neatly folded on the chair next to my bed. He put on a pair of his jersey boxer shorts too, Jack Laurens, nothing less. I put them on and he smiles at me. Hmm, another Grayson Maury underwear - a trophy to add to my collection - with the car, the BlackBerry, the Mac, his black jacket, and a set of precious old original editions. I shake my head at her wideness and frown when a scene from Tess crosses my mind: the strawberry scene. It evokes my dream. To hell with Dr. LORENZO - Freud would have a field day - and then he would expire trying to deal with numerous Shadows.

'I'll give you some room now that you're on your feet.' Grayson walks out to the living room, and I walk around the bathroom. I need some occupancy, and I want a quick wash. Seven minutes later, I am in the living room, rubbed, brushed, and dressed in jeans, my camisole, heavens? Grayson Maury in underwear's Ah. Grayson looks up from the small dining table where he is having breakfast. Breakfast! Jeez, right now.

'Eat,' he said.

Saint Moses... my dream. I am speechless at the thought of his tongue on his palate. Hmm, his expert tongue.

'Naddalin,' he said sternly, pulling me out of my reverie.

It is too early for me. How do you deal with this?

'I will have some tea. Can I have a croissant for later?'

He looks at me suspiciously and I smile very sweetly.

'Don't rain on my parade, Naddalin,' he warns softly.

'I will eat later when my stomach is awake. Around 7:30 in the morning... okay?'

'Okay.' He looks at me.

Honestly. I must concentrate so as not to make a face at him.

'I want to roll my eyes at you.'

', do, and you'll make my day,' he said sternly.

I look at the ceiling.

'Well, a spanking would wake me up, I guess.' I tighten my lips in silent contemplation. The mouth of Grayson opens.

'On the other hand, I don't want you all to be hot and messy, the climate here is pretty hot.' I shrug my shoulders nonchalantly.

Grayson shuts his mouth and tries extremely hard to appear unhappy, but desperately fails.

I can see the humor behind his eyes.

'You are, as always, a challenge, Miss Black. Drink your tea.'

I notice the Twinings tag, and inside my heart is singing. See, he cares, my subconscious mouth is looking at me. I sit down and face her, drinking her beauty. Will I ever get enough of this man?

As we leave the room, Grayson throws a sweatshirt at me.

'You will need it.'

I look at him, puzzled.

'Believe me.' He smiles, leans in, and kisses me quickly on the lips, then grabs my hand and we walk out.

Outside, in the relative coolness of the pre-dawn twilight, the valet hands Grayson a set of keys for a flash sports car with a soft top. I raise an eyebrow at Grayson, who smirks at me.

'You know, sometimes it's great to be me,' he said with a knowing but smug smile that I just cannot help but emulate. He is so adorable when he is playful and carefree. He opens my car door with an exaggerated arc and I climb up. He is in such a good mood.

'Where are we going?'

'You will see.' He smiles as he starts the car and we head to Savannah Parkway. He programs the GPS and flips a switch on the steering wheel and a classical orchestral piece fills the car.

'What is this?' I then ask that the soft and sweet sound of a hundred violin strings assail us.

'It is from La Traviata. An opera by Verdi.'

Oh, my... that is lovely.

'La Traviata, I have heard of it. I do not know where. What does that mean?'

Grayson looks at me and smiles.

'Well, the woman got lost. It is based on Alexandre Dumas' book La Dame aux Camelias.'

'Ah. I read it.'

'I thought you could.'

'The doomed courtesan.' I squirm uncomfortably in the plush leather seat. Is he trying to tell me something 'Hmm, that's a depressing story,' I mumble?

'Too depressing Would you like to choose some music? It is on my iPod.' Grayson has that secret smile again.

I cannot see his iPod in Pittsburgh where. He taps the console screen between us, and behold - there is a playlist.

'You choose.' Her lips twist into a smile, and I know it is a challenge. iPod's.

Grayson Maury, that should be interesting. I scroll the touchscreen and find the perfect song. I press play. I would not have imagined it for a Britney fan. The club-

mix, techno beat assails us both, and Grayson lowers the volume. It is too early for that: Britney is at her most sensual.

'Toxic, eh? Grayson smiles.

'I don't know what you mean.' I pretend innocent.

He turns the music down a little more and I hug myself. My inner goddess is standing on the podium waiting for her gold medal. He lowered the music.

Victory!

'I didn't put this song on my iPod,' he says casually, and puts his foot down so I am thrown back into my seat as the car speeds down the freeway.

What he knows what he is doing, the bastard. What has he done? And I must listen to Britney repeatedly. Who who?

The song ends and the iPod shuffles Damien Rice, sad. WhoWho I look out the window, my stomach rolls over.

Who?

'It was Leila,' he replies to my unspoken thoughts. How does he do that?

'Leila?

'An ex, who put the song on my iPod.'

Damien chirps in the background as I sit stunned. An ex... ex-submissive An ex - 'One of the fifteen?' I ask.

'Yes.'

'What happened to him?'

'We finished.'

'Why?'

Oh fuck. It is too early for this kind of conversation. But he seems relaxed, happy even, and talkative.

'She wanted more.' His voice is low, even introspective, and he leaves the sentence hanging between us, ending it again with that powerful little word.

'And you didn't?' I ask before I can use my brain-to-mouth filter. Damn, do I wanna know?

He shakes his head.

'I never wanted more, until I met you.'

I pant, staggering. Oh my. Isn't that what I want? He wants more. He wants it too! My inner goddess has returned to the podium and cartwheels around the stadium.

It is not just me.

'What happened to the other fourteen?' I ask.

Damn, he is talking - enjoy it.

'Do you want a divorced, beheaded, dead list?'

'You are not Henry VIII.'

'Okay. In no order, I have only had long-term relationships with four women, other than Elena.'

'Elena?'

'Mrs. MLF stiflers mom to you. He half-smiled his secret private joke smile.'

Elena! Holy shit. The evil one has a name and its completely foreign sound. A vision of a glorious pale-skinned vampire with raven hair and ruby red lips comes to mind, and I know she is beautiful. I must not linger. I must not linger.

'What happened to the four?' I ask to distract myself.

'So curious, so hungry for information, Miss Black,' he scolds playfully.

'Oh, M. When is your period due?'

'Naddalin - a man needs to know these things.'

'Is he?'

'I do.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want you to get pregnant.'

'Me neither! Well, not in a few years yet.'

Grayson blinks in surprise, then visibly relaxes. Okay. Grayson does not want kids.

Now or never, I am in shock at his sudden and unprecedeted attack of candor. It is early in the morning Something in the Georgia water The Georgia air What else I want to know about Carpe Diem.

'So the other four, what happened?' I ask.

'One met someone else. The other three wanted - more. I have not been in the market for longer.'

'And the others?' I support.

He looks at me briefly and just shakes his head.

'It did not work.'

Whoa, a lot of information to process. I look in the rearview mirror of the car and notice the gentle swell of pink and aquamarine in the sky behind. Dawn follows us.

'Where are we going?' I ask, puzzled, looking at I-95. We are heading south, that is all I know.

'An airfield.'

'We're not going back to New York, are we?' I gasp, alarmed. I did not say goodbye to my mom. She is fucking waiting for us for dinner.

He is laughing.

'No, Naddalin, we're going to indulge in my second favorite hobby.'

'Second?' I frown at him.

'Yes. I told you my favorite this morning.'

I glance at his glorious profile, frowning, racking my brains.

'Indulging in you, Miss Black, that must be high on my list. I can have you anyway.'

Oh.

'Well, that's pretty high on my confusing and kinky priority list too.' I mumble, blushing, 'Glad to hear it,' he mumbles dryly.

'So, airfield?

He smiles at me.

'Outbreak.'

The term rings a vague bell. He already mentioned it.

'We're going to chase the dawn, Naddalin.' He turns and smiles at me as the GPS prompts him to turn right into what looks like an industrial complex. He stops in front of a large white building with a sign that says Brunswick Soaring Association.

Slippage! Are we going to get high?

He cuts the engine.

'Are you ready for this?' he asks.

'You fly?'

'Yes.'

'Yes please!' I do not hesitate. He smiles and leans forward and kisses me.

'Another first, Miss Black,' he said as he got out of the car.

Premiere: What sort of premiere? First time flying a glider... damn it! No - he said he already had. I am relaxing. He walks around and opens my door. The sky

transformed into a subtle opal, sparkling, and shining softly behind the sporadic and childish clouds. Dawn is upon us.

Taking my hand, Grayson walks me around the building to a large expanse of tarmac where several planes are parked. Waiting next to them is a shaven-headed, wild-looking man, accompanied by Stephen.

Stephen! Is Grayson going to Pittsburgh where without this man? I beam at him and he smiles sweetly at me.

'Mr. Maury, this is your tow pilot, Mr. Mark Hays,' Stephen says. Grayson and Hays shake hands and strike up a conversation, which feels very technical about wind speed, directions, etc.

'Hello, Stephen,' I whisper timidly.

'Miss Black'. He nods at me and I frown. 'Naddalin,' he corrects himself.

'He's been hell on wheels the last few days. Glad we are here,' he said conspiratorially.

Oh, this is news - Why surely not because of me! Revelation Thursday! There must be something about the water in the savannah that allows these men to relax a bit.

'Naddalin,' Grayson summons me. 'Come.' He holds out his hand.

'See you later.' I smile at Stephen, and greeting me quickly, he heads back to the parking lot.

'Mr. Hays, this is my girlfriend Naddalin Black.'

'Nice to meet you,' I whisper as we shake hands.

Hays gives me a bright smile.

'Likewise,' he says, and I can tell by his accent that he's British.

As I take Grayson's hand, there is growing excitement in my stomach. Wow... high! We follow Mark Hays on the tarmac towards the runway. He and Grayson have an ongoing conversation. I understand the essentials. We will be in a Blahnik L-23, which is better than the L-13, although that is up for debate. Hays will be piloting a

Piper Pawnee. He has been flying taildraggers for about five years now. It does not mean anything to me, but looking at Grayson he is so lively, so in his element, it is a pleasure to watch him.

The plane itself is long, sleek, and white with orange stripes. It has a small cockpit with two seats facing each other. It is attached by a long white cable to a small conventional single-propeller aircraft. Hays opens the large transparent Perspex dome that frames the cockpit, allowing us to climb up.

'We need to tie up your parachute first.'

Parachute!

'I'll do this,' Grayson interrupts and removes the harness from Hays, who smiles friendly at him.

'I'm going to get some ballast,' Hays says and walks over to the plane.

'You like to tie me up in things.' I observe dryly.

'Miss Black, you have no idea. Here, get into the straps.'

I do as I am told, placing my arm on his shoulder. Grayson stiffens slightly but does not move. Once my feet are in the buckles, he pulls up the parachute and I put my arms through the shoulder straps. Skillfully, he fastens the harness and tightens all the straps.

'There, you're going to make it,' he said softly, but his eyes were shining.
'Do you have your tie from yesterday?'

I agree.

'Do you want me to put my hair in the air?'

'Yes.'

I quickly do what I am asked to do.

'Go ahead,' Grayson orders. He is still so bossy. I will ride in the back.

'No, in the front. The pilot is seated in the back.'

'But you won't be able to see.'

'I'll see a lot of them.' He smiles.

I do not think I have ever seen him so happy, bossy, but happy. I climb up, settling into the leather seat. It is surprisingly comfortable. Grayson bends down, pulls the harness over my shoulders, reaches between my legs for the lower waistband, and slit in the clip that rests against my stomach. It tightens all the retaining straps.

'Hmm, twice in one morning I'm a lucky man,' he whispers and kisses me quickly.

'It will not take long - twenty, thirty minutes at the most. The thermals are not great this time of morning, but it is so mind blowing up there at this hour. Hope you are not nervous.'

'Excited.' I am beaming.

Where does that ridiculous smile come from? Part of me is terrified. My inner goddess - she is under a blanket behind the sofa.

'Good.' He smiles back at me, stroking my face, then disappears.

I hear and feel his movements as he climbs behind me. Of course, he tied me so tightly that I could not move around to see him... typical! We are exceptionally low on the ground. In front of me are a panel of dials and levers and a big stick. I am going alone.

Mark Hays appears with a cheerful smile as he checks my straps and leans in and checks the cockpit floor. It is the ballast.

'Yes, sure. First time?' He asks me.

'Yes.'

'You'll love it.'

'Thank you, Mr. Hays.'

'Call me Mark.' He turns to Grayson. 'Okay?'

'Yes. Let us go.'

I am so glad I did not eat anything. I am beyond excited and do not think my stomach would be a game for food, excitement, and getting off the ground. Once again, I place myself in the skillful hands of this handsome man. Mark closes the cockpit cover, walks over to the plane ahead, and climbs up.

The Piper's single propeller kicks in and my nervous stomach goes back to my throat. Jeez... I do this. Slowly mark the taxis on the track, and as the cable picks up the tension, we suddenly rush forward. We are out. I hear chatter on the radio behind me. It is Mark talking to the tower - but I cannot understand what he is saying.

As the Piper picks up speed, so do we. It is very bumpy, and in front of us, the single-propeller plane is still on the ground. Jeez, will we ever get up? And suddenly my stomach goes out of my throat and falls freely through my body to the floor - we are in the air.

'Here we go, baby!' Grayson screams behind me. And we are in our bubble, just the two of us. All I hear is the sound of the wind and the distant hum of Piper's engine.

I grab the edge of my seat with both hands, so firmly my knuckles are white.

We head west, inland away from the rising sun, gaining height, crossing fields, woods, and houses, and I-95. Oh my. It is amazing, above us only the sky. The light is amazing, diffuse, and warm in hue, and I remember Sam walking around about ``magic hour,' a time of day photographers love - that is it... just after dawn, and I am in it, with Grayson.

Suddenly, I remember Sam's show. Hmm. I must tell Grayson. I wonder briefly how he will react. But I will not care, not now - I enjoy the ride. My ears jump as we gain height, and the ground slips farther and farther. It is so peaceful.

I fully understand why he likes being here. Far from his BlackBerry and all the pressures of his profession.

The radio crackles through life and Mark mentions 3000 feet (about 914.4 m). Jeez, that sounds high. I am checking the field and cannot see anything there anymore.

'Release,' Grayson says into the radio, and suddenly the Piper disappears, and the pulling sensation provided by the little plane ceases. We are floating, floating above Georgia.

Holy shit - this is exciting. The plane tilts and turns as the wing dives, and we head towards the sun. Icarus. That is it. I fly close to the sun, but he is with me, leading me. I gasp at the realization. We are spiraling and spiraling and the view in this morning light is spectacular.

'Hold on!' he yells, and we dive in again - but this time he is not stopping. Suddenly I am upside down, looking at the ground through the top of the cockpit canopy.

I squeal loudly, my arms automatically unleash, my hands spread over the Perspex to keep from falling. I can hear him laughing. Bastard! But his joy is contagious, and I also laugh as he straightens the plane.

'I'm glad I didn't have breakfast!' I yell at him.

'Yes, in hindsight, it's good that you didn't because I'm going to start over.'

He plunges the plane again until we are upside down. This time, because I am ready, I hang on to the harness, but it makes me smile and laugh like a fool. He levels the plane again.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' he calls.

'Yes.'

We fly, diving majestically in the air, listening to the wind and the silence, in the early morning light. Who could ask for more?

'Do you see the joystick in front of you?' he shouts again.

I watch the stick moving slightly between my legs. Oh no, where is he going with that?

'Catch.'

Oh shit. He is gonna make me fly the plane. No!

'Go ahead, Naddalin. Take it,' he urged more vehemently.

Tentatively I grab it and feel the pitch and yaw of what I guess are rudders and paddles or whatever it is that keeps this thing in the air.

'Hold on... keep it steady. See the middle dial in front. Keep the needle in neutral.' My heart is in my mouth. Holy shit. I fly a glider... I fly.

'Good girl.' Grayson seems delighted.

'I'm amazed that you let me take control,' I shouted.

'You would be amazed what I would let you do, Miss Black. Come back to me now.'

The joystick suddenly move, and I let go as we spiral down several meters, my ears starting to stick out again. The ground is getting closer and it looks like we could hit it shortly. Damn, this is scary.

'BMA, this is BG N Papa 3 Alpha, entering runway seven downwind to the left towards the grass, BMA.' Grayson sounds like his usual bossy self. The tower answers him by radio, but I do not understand what they are saying. We sail again in a wide circle, slowly sinking to the ground. I can see the airport, the airstrips and we come back over I-95.

'Wait, baby. It can get bumpy.'

After another circle, we dive, and suddenly we are on the ground with a brief kick, running along the grass - holy crap. My teeth chatter as we bump into the ground with alarming speed until we finally come to a stop. The plane swings slightly then dives to the right.

I take a deep breath of air as Grayson leans over and opens the cockpit cover, climbing and stretching.

'How was it?' he asks, and his eyes are a shiny, dazzling silvery gray. He leans in to unbuckle me.

'It was amazing. Thank you,' I whisper.

'Was that more?' he asks, his voice tinged with hope.

'Much more,' I breathe, and he smiles.

'Come.' He holds out his hand and I climb out of the cockpit.

As soon as I get out he grabs me and holds me against his body. Suddenly his hand is in my hair, pulling it so that my head tilts back, and his other hand goes down to the base of my spine. He kisses me, long, hard, and passionately, his tongue in my mouth.

His breathing rises, his ardor... Holy cow - his erection... we are in a field. But I do not care. My hands twist in his hair, staring at him. I want it, here, now, on the ground. He pulls away and looks at me, his eyes now dark and bright in the early morning light, full of raw, arrogant sensuality. Wow. It takes my breath away.

'Breakfast,' he murmurs, making it deliciously erotic.

How do you make bacon and eggs sound like a broken fruit? It is an extraordinary skill. He turns around, clasping my hand, and we head back to the car.

'What about the glider?'

'Will someone takes care of this?' He said disdainfully. 'We're going to eat now. His tone is unequivocal.

Food! He talks about food when all I want is him.

'Come.' He smiles. I have never seen him like this, and it is a joy to see. I find myself walking beside him, hand in hand, with a silly, silly smile on my face. It reminds me of when I was ten and spent the day at Disneyland with Ray. It was a perfect day, and it is sure to look like it.

Back in the car, as we head back onto I-95 towards Savannah, my phone alarm goes off. Oh yes... my pill.

'What is that?' Grayson asks, curious, looking at me.

I dig in my purse for the package.

'Alarm for my pill,' I mumble as my cheeks flush.

His lips are raised.

'Good, well done. I hate condoms.'

I hunt a little more. He is as condescending as ever.

'I love that you introduced me to Mark as your girlfriend,' I whisper.

'Isn't that what you are?' He raises an eyebrow.

'You wanted a submissive.'

'Me too, Naddalin, and me too. But I told you, I want more too.'

Oh my. He comes back, and hope springs in me, leaving me breathless.

'I'm very happy that you want more,' I whisper.

'We aim to please, Miss Black.' He smirks as we enter the International House of Pancakes.

'I JUMP.' I smile back at him. I do not believe it. Who would have thought... Grayson Maury at IHOP.

It is 8:30 am but calm in the restaurant. It smells of sweet dough, frying, and disinfectant. Hmm... not such a seductive aroma. Grayson takes me to a booth.

'I never would have imagined you here,' I said, sliding us into a booth.

'My dad used to bring us to one of them every time my mom left for a medical conference. It was our secret.' He smiles at me, gray eyes dancing, then picks up a menu, running a hand through his unruly hair as he looks at it.

Oh, I want to run my hands through this hair. I take a menu and examine it. I realize that I am starving.

'I know what I want,' he hisses, his voice low and hoarse.

I look at him, and he looks at me in that way that tightens every muscle in my stomach and takes my breath away, his eyes dark and smoking. Holy shit. I watch him, my blood singing in my veins responding to his call.

'I want what you want,' I whisper.

He inhales sharply.

'Here?' he asks suggestively, raising an eyebrow at me, grinning nastily, his teeth catching the tip of his tongue.

Oh my... sex in IHOP. His expression changes darken.

'Don't bite your lip,' he orders. 'Not here, not now.' His eyes harden momentarily, and for a moment he looks so deliciously dangerous. 'If I can't have you here, don't tempt me.' 'Hi, my name is Leandra, what can I get you... uh... people... uh... today, this morning...?' Her voice trailed off, stumbling over her words as she had one eye full of Mr.

Beautiful in front of me. She blushes scarlet, and a tiny hint of sympathy for his unwelcome bubbles in my consciousness because he always does this to me. His presence allows me to briefly escape his sensual gaze.

'Naddalin? he invites me over, ignoring him, and I do not think anyone can instill as much charity in my name as they did then.

I swallow, praying that I am not the same color as poor Leandra.

'I told you, I want what you want.' I keep my voice soft, low, and he looks at me eagerly. Damn, my inner goddess was swooning. Am I up to this game?

Leandra looks from me to him and vice versa. She is the same color as her shiny red hair.

'Should I give you one more minute to decide?'

'No. We know what we want.' Grayson's mouth twists with a sexy little smile.

'We will have two servings of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, a black coffee with skim milk and an English tea for breakfast, if you do,' Grayson said, not taking his eyes off me.

'Thank you sir. Will that be all?' Leandra whispers, looking at Pittsburgh where but the two of us. We both turn to look at her, and she blushes purple again and walks away.

'You know it's really not fair.' I look at the Formica tabletop, tracing a pattern on it with my index finger, trying to sound nonchalant.

'What is not right?'

'How do you disarm people? Women. Me.'

'Am I disturbing you?'

I sniffled.

'All the time.'

'It's just appearance, Naddalin,' he said softly.

'No, Grayson, it's more than that.'

His forehead creases.

'You disarms me, Miss Black. Your innocence. It cuts all the crap.'

'Is that why you changed your mind?'

'Change of opinion?'

'Yeah - about... uh... us?'

He thoughtfully strokes her chin with his long, skillful fingers.

'I do not think I have changed my mind per se. We just need to redefine our settings, redefine our battle lines, if you want. We can do that job, I am sure. game. I will punish you if you deviate from the rules. Other than that... well, it is all up for discussion. These are my demands, Miss Black. What do you say about this? '

'So am I going to sleep with you in your bed?'

'Is this what you want?'

'Yes.'

'I agree then. Besides, I sleep very well when you are in my bed. I had no idea.' His forehead creases as his voice fade.

'I was afraid you would leave me if I didn't accept all of this,' I whisper.

'I am not going to Pittsburgh where Naddalin. Besides...' He pauses, and after some thought, he adds. 'We are taking your advice, your definition: compromise. You emailed it to me. And so far it is working for me.'

'Love that you want more,' I whisper shyly.

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

'Trust me. I just do.' He gives me a smirk. He is hiding something. What?

At this point, Leandra arrives with breakfast and our conversation ends. My stomach rumbles, reminding me of how voracious I am. Grayson watches with boring approval as I devour everything on my plate.

'May I treat you?' I ask Grayson.

'Treat me how?'

'Pay for this meal.'

Grayson sniffs.

'I do not think so.' he mocks.

'Please. I want to.'

He frowns.

'Are you trying to completely emulate me?'

'It's probably the only place I can afford to pay.'

'Naddalin, I appreciate the thought. Yes. But no.'

I tighten my lips.

'Don't frown,' he threatens, his eyes shining ominously.

Of course, he does not ask me for my mother's address. He already knows it, stalker, that he is. When he stops outside the house, I do not comment. What is the point?

'Do you want to come in?' I ask shyly.

'I need to work, Naddalin, but I will be back tonight. At what time?

I ignore the stroke of unwanted disappointment. Why do I want to spend every minute with this controlling sex god? Oh yes, I fell in love with him, and he can fly.

'Thanks... for the most.'

'My pleasure, Naddalin. He kisses me and I breathe in his sexy Grayson scent.'

'I will see you later.'

'Try to stop me,' he whispers.

I say goodbye to him as he flees to sunny Georgia. I am still wearing his sweatshirt and his underwear, and I am too hot.

In the kitchen, my mom is in complete shambles. It is not every day that she must entertain a multi-billionaire, and it stresses her out.

'How are you honey?' she asks, and I blush because she must know what I was doing last night.

'I am fine. Grayson took me on a glider this morning.' I hope the added information will distract her.

'Flying like in a small plane without an engine, what kind of gliding?'

I agree.

'Wow.'

She is speechless - a new concept for my mother. She is speechless, but eventually recovers to herself and resumes her initial line of questioning.

'How was last night, did you speak?'

Jeez. I rinse off the brilliant scarlet.

'We talked - last night and today. It is getting better.'

'Good.' She returns her attention to the four cookbooks she has opened on the kitchen table.

'Mom... if you want, I'll cook tonight.'

'Oh honey, that's nice of you, but I want to do it.'

'Okay.' I grimace, knowing full well that my mother's cooking is haphazard.

She is improved since she moved to Savannah with Bob. There was a time when I did not subject anyone to her kitchen... even - who do I hate Oh yes - Ms. MLF stifler's mom- Elena. Well, she. Will I ever meet this damn woman?

I decided to send a quick thank you to Grayson.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Flight rather than painful

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:20 am. EST

To: Grayson Maury

Sometimes you know how to show a girl an enjoyable time.

Thank you

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Topic: Flare vs. painful

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:24 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

I will take one of these two on your snoring. I had a wonderful time too.

But I always do when I am with you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: SNORING

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:26 am. EST

To: Grayson Maury

I DO NOT SNORE. And if I do, it is very sassy of you to point it out.

You are not a gentleman, Mr. Maury! And you are also in the Great South!

Naddalin

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Somniloquy

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:28 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

I never pretended to be a gentleman, Naddalin, and I think I have made this point to you many times. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I will admit a little white lie: no - you do not snore, but you talk. And it is fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Grayson Murray

Cad and CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Holy shit. I know I speak in my sleep. Maury has told me enough times. What did I say? Oh no.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Spill the Beans

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:32 EST

To: Grayson Maury

You are a caddy and a scoundrel - certainly not a gentleman.

So what did I say? No kisses for you until you speak!

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sleeping Beauty

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:35 am. EST

To: Naddalin Black

It would be very sassy of me to say that, and I have been reprimanded for it before.

But if you behave, I can tell you tonight. I must go to a meeting now.

(see yes, baby.)

15

Grayson Murray

CEO, Cad & Scoundrel, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc. This is true! I will maintain radio silence until tonight. I smoke. Jeez. Suppose I say I hate him, or worse yet, love him, in my sleep. Oh, I hope not. I am not ready to tell him that, and I am sure he is not ready to hear it if he ever wants to hear it. I frown at my computer and decide that whatever I am cooking I am going to bake.

My mom opted for gazpacho soup and a barbecue with olive oil, garlic, and lemon marinated steaks. Grayson loves meat and it is easy to make. Bob volunteered to take care of the barbecue. What is it between men and fire, I reflect as I stalk my mother through the supermarket with the shopping cart?

As we walk through the raw meat cabinet, my phone rings. I jostle, thinking it is Grayson. I do not recognize the number.

'Hello?' I answer breathlessly.

'Naddalin Black?'

'Yes.'

'This is Elizabeth Morgan from SIP.'

'Oh hi.'

'I am calling to offer you the position of assistant to Mr. Jack Hyde. We would like you to start on Monday.'

'Wow. That is great. Thanks!'

'Do you know the salary details?'

'Yes. Yes... that's - I mean, I take your offer. I would love to come and work for you.'

'Excellent. See you Monday at 8:30 am?'

'See you soon. Goodbye. And thank you.'

I shine towards my mother.

'You have a job?'

I nod happily, and she whines and hugs me in the middle of the Publix supermarket.

'Congratulations, honey! We must buy champagne!' She claps her hands and jumps up and down. Is she forty-two or twelve?

I look at my phone and frown, there is a missed call from Grayson. He never calls me. I will call him back right away.

'Naddalin,' he replies immediately.

'Hi,' I whisper timidly.

'I must go back to New York. Something has happened. I am on my way to Hilton Head now. Please apologize to your mother - I cannot cook dinner. He looks very professional.'

'Nothing serious I hope?'

'I have a situation I must deal with. I will see you on Friday. I will send Stephen to pick you up from the airport if I cannot come by myself.' He looks cold. Angry even. But for the first time, I do not immediately think it is me.

'Okay. I hope you get your situation sorted out. Have a safe flight.'

'You too, baby,' he breathes, and with those words, my Grayson is back briefly. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last 'situation' he had was my virginity. Damn, I hope that is not it.

I look at my mother. His previous jubilation turned into worry.

'It is Grayson, he had to go back to New York. He apologizes.'

'Oh! It is too bad, honey. We can still barbecue, and now we have something to celebrate - your new job! You must tell me all about it.'

It is late afternoon, and mom and I are lying by the pool. My mom has relaxed to the point where she is horizontal now that Mr. Megabucks is not coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun, trying to lose my paleness, I think about last night and today's breakfast. I think of Grayson and my ridiculous smile refuses to subside. It keeps crossing my face, spontaneously and bewildered, as I remember our different conversations and what we did... what he did.

There seems to be a tidal shift in Grayson's attitude. He denies it but - he admits he is trying to do more. What could have changed? What has changed since he sent his long email and when I saw him yesterday? What did he do? He had dinner with... her. Elena.

Holy shit!

My scalp stings at the realization. She said something to him, Oh... for being a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup or on her glass of wine and choked her.

'What's the matter, Naddalin, honey?' Mom asks, surprised at her torpor.

'I am just spending a moment, mom. What time is it?'

'Around 6:30 p.m, honey.'

Hmm... it will not have landed yet. Can I ask her if I ask her or she has nothing to do with it? I very much hope so. What I said in my sleep shit... unattended

remark dreaming about him. I bet anything, or was, I hope the sea of change is from him and not because of her.

I am suffocating in this damn heat. I need another dip in the pool.

As I get ready for bed, I turn on my computer. I have not heard from Grayson.

Not even a word that it arrived safe.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Safe arrival?

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:32 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Sir

Please let me know that you have arrived safe. I am starting to worry.
Thinking of you.

Your Naddalin. x

Three minutes later, I hear my email inbox pinging.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Sorry

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:36 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I arrived safe, and please accept my apologies for not letting you know. I do not want to worry you, it is heartwarming to know that you care about me. I think of you too and I always look forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I sigh, Grayson is back to formality.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: The situation

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:40 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

It is obvious that I care deeply about you. How can you doubt it?

I hope your 'situation' is in hand.

Your Naddalin x

PS: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep?

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Advocacy for the fifth

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:45 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black,

I like the fact that you care about me. The 'situation' here is not yet resolved.

Regarding your PS: The answer is - No.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Pleading for Madness

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:48 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Hope it was fun. But know that I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am unconscious. You misunderstood me.

A man in your late years is surely a little deaf.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Guilty, please

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 7:52 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

Sorry, could you speak, I cannot hear you.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Please Madness Again

Date: June 2, 2009, 10:54 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

You are driving me crazy you are even in my head always.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: I hope so...

Date: June 2, 2009 7:59 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Dear, Miss Black

I plan to do just that on Friday night. Waiting.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Grrrrrr

Date: June 2, 2009, 11:02 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

I am officially angry with you.

Good evening.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Wild Cat

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 8:05 PM

To: Naddalin Black

Are you grumbling at me at Miss Black?

I have my cat for growlers.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

I have never seen a cat in her apartment. No, I am not going to answer him.

Oh, he can be so maddening sometimes. numerous Shadows of Exasperation. I climb into bed and lie down staring at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the darkness. I hear another ping from my computer. I am not going to watch. Not. No, I am not going to watch. Gah!

Like the fool that I am, I cannot resist the allure of Grayson Maury's words.

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: What you said in your sleep...

Date: Jun 2, 2009, 8:20 p.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

I would rather hear you say the words you said in your sleep when you are conscious, which is why I won. I am not telling you. Go to bed. You will need to rest with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Oh no... what did I say? It is as bad as I am sure.

My mother hugs me tight.

'Follow your heart, honey, and please, please - try not to overthink it. Relax and have fun. You are so young, honey. life to live, let it happen. You deserve the best of everything. ' His heartfelt words are heartwarming whispered in my ear. She kisses my hair.

'Oh mom.' Hot, unwelcome tears sting my eyes as I cling to her.

'Honey, you know what they say. You must kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.'

I give him an unbalanced, bittersweet smile.

'I kissed a prince, mom. Hope he does not turn into a frog.

She gives me her most Daring smile of love, motherly, absolute, unconditional, and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman as we kiss again.

'Naddalin - they're calling your flight,' Bob's voice is anxious.

'Would you like to visit, mom?'

'Of course honey - soon. I love you.'

'Me too.'

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug Bob and turn around, head for the door - I do not have time for the first class lounge today. I do not want to look back. But I do... and Bob holds my mother, and tears flow on his face. I cannot hold mine anymore. I lowered my head and made my way to the portal, keeping my eyes on the shiny white floor, blurred through my tearful tears.

Once onboard, in the luxury of first-class, I curl up in my seat and try to calm myself down. It is always painful to get away from mom... She is disgusting, disorganized, but newly insightful, and she loves me. Unconditional love - what every child deserves from their parents. I frown at my whimsical thoughts and pull out my BlackBerry, staring despondently.

What does Grayson know about love? He did not have the unconditional love he was entitled to during his exceedingly early years. My heart twists and my mother's words float like a zephyr through my mind: Yes, Naddalin. Hell - what do you need - a flashing neon sign on his forehead. She thinks Grayson loves me, but then it is my mom, of course, she would. She thinks I deserve the best of everything. I frown. That is right, and in a moment of surprising clarity, I see it. It is amazingly simple: I want his love. I need Grayson Maury to love me.

Therefore I am so reluctant about our relationship - because, at a fundamental and fundamental level, I recognize within myself a deep compulsion to be loved and cherished.

-And-

Because of its numerous Shadows - I hold back. BDSM is a distraction from the real problem. The sex is amazing, he is rich, he is beautiful, but it all makes no sense without his love, and the real failure is I do not know if he is capable of loving. He does not even love himself. I remember his self-hatred, his love is the only form he found - acceptable. Punished - whipped, beaten, whatever the relationship their relationship involves - he feels unworthy of love. Why does he feel like this? How can he feel like this? His words haunt me: "It is exceedingly difficult to grow up in a perfect family when you are not perfect."

I close my eyes, imagining her pain, and I cannot begin to understand it. I shudder remembering that I may have divulged too much. What did I confess to Grayson in my sleep? What secrets did I reveal?

I stare at the BlackBerry in the vague hope that it will give me answers. Unsurprisingly, it is not very soon. As we have not taken off yet, I decided to send my numerous Shadows by email.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Coming home

Date: June 3, 2009, 12:53 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Maury

I am once again installed in first class, for which I thank you. I am counting the minutes until I see you tonight, and maybe I am torturing you the truth about my nightly confession.

Your Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Subject:

Return

Home Date: Jun 3, 2009, 9:58 a.m. To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin, I cannot wait to see you.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

His answer makes me frown. It looks cut and formal, not his usual witty, concise style.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Coming home

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:01 PM EST

To: Grayson Murray Very

Dear, Mr. Maury

I hope all is well in 'the situation'. The tone of your email is disturbing.

Naddalin x

From: Grayson Maury

Subject: Coming home

Date: Jun 3, 2009 10:04 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

Naddalin

The situation could be better. Have you ever taken off? If so, you should not send an email.

You put yourself in danger, in direct violation of the rule relating to your safety. I wanted to say what I said about the punishments.

Grayson Maury

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

Shit. Okay. Jeez. What gnaws at him? The situation Maybe Stephen left AWOL, he lost a few million on the stock market - whatever the reason.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Excessive reaction

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:06 PM EST

To: Grayson Maury

Dear, Mr. Grumpy

The doors of the plane are always open. We are late, but only ten minutes. My well-being and that of the passengers around me are guaranteed. You can put away your nervous palm for the time being.

Miss Black

From: Grayson Maury

Thread: Apologies - Twitchy Palm Stowed

Date: Jun 3, 2009 10:08 a.m.

To: Naddalin Black

I miss you and your smart mouth Miss Black.

I want you home safe.

Grayson Murray

CEO, Murray Enterprises Handling Inc.

From: Naddalin Black

Subject: Apologies accepted

Date: June 3, 2009, 1:10 p.m. EST

To: Grayson Maury

They close the doors. You will not hear another glance from me, especially given your deafness.

see yes.

Naddalin x

I turn off the BlackBerry, unable to shake off my anxiety. Something is wrong with Grayson.

Maybe 'the situation is out of control. I sit up, looking up at the locker where my bags are stored. I got this done this morning, with my help from his mother,

to buy Grayson a little gift to thank you for the first class and the gliding. I smile at the memory of the flight -

It was something else. I do not know yet if I am going to give him a silly gift. He might think it is childish - and if he is in a weird mood, maybe not. I cannot wait to come back and I am afraid of what to expect at the end of my trip. As I mentally flip through all the scenarios that could be 'the situation, I realize that once again, the only empty seat is next to me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that Grayson may have bought the adjacent seat so I cannot talk to anyone. I dismiss the idea as ridiculous - no one can be so controlling, so jealous, surely. I closed my eyes as the plane taxied to the runway.

I emerge into the Sea-Tac arrivals terminal eight hours later to find Stephen waiting and holding up a sign that reads Miss A Black. Honestly! But it is good to see it.

'Hello, Stephen.'

'Miss Black,' he greets me formally, but I see a hint of a smile in his sharp brown eyes.

He looks like his usual crisp charcoal suit, white shirt, and charcoal tie.

'I know what you look like Stephen, you don't need a board, and I would like you to call me, Naddalin.'

'Naddalin. Can I take your bags, please?'

'No, I can do it. Thank you.'

Her lips tighten noticeably.

'But, if you're more comfortable taking them,' I stutter.

'Thank you.' He grabs my newly acquired backpack and wheeled case for the clothes my mom bought me. 'Over here, ma'am.'

I sigh. He is so polite. I remember, although I would like to erase it from my memory, that this man bought me underwear. In fact - and the thought disturbs me - he is the only man who is ever bought me underwear. Even Ray never had to endure this ordeal.

We walk silently towards the black Audi SUV outside in the airport parking lot, and he holds the door open for me. I climb up, wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return trip to New York was a clever idea. It was cool and welcome to Georgia. Here, I feel exposed. Once Stephen had put my suitcases in the trunk, we left for Escala.

The journey is slow, caught in rush hour traffic. Stephen keeps his eyes on the road ahead. Taciturn does not begin to describe it.

I cannot stand the silence anymore.

'How's Grayson doing, Stephen?'

'Mr. Maury is concerned, Miss Black.'

Oh, that must be 'the situation'. I am mining a vein of gold.

'Concerned?'

'Yes ma'am.'

I frown at Stephen, and he looks at me in the rearview mirror, our eyes meet. He did not say anything more. Damn, he can be as low-key as the control freak himself.

'Is he okay?'

'I believe so, ma'am.'

'Are you more comfortable calling me, Miss Black?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'Oh okay.'

Well, that ends our conversation and we continue in silence. I started to think Stephen's recent slip when he told me Grayson had been hell on wheels, was an anomaly. He is embarrassed, worried that he has been disloyal. The silence is suffocating.

'Could you please put on some music?'

'Certainly, ma'am. What would you like to hear?'

'Something soothing.

I see a smile play on Stephen's lips as our eyes meet again briefly in the mirror.

'Yes ma'am.'

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel, and the gentle tension of Pachelbel's canon fills the space between us. Oh yes... that is what I need.

'Thank you.' I sit down as we drive slowly but steadily along I-5 into New York City.

Twenty-five minutes later, he drops me off in front of the impressive facade which is the entrance to Escala.

'Go ahead, ma'am,' he said, holding the door open for me. 'I'll bring your bags.' Its expression is soft, warm, even avuncular.

Fuck... Uncle Stephen, what a thought.

'Thanks for meeting me.'

'It's a pleasure, Miss Black.' He smiles and I walk towards the building. The porter nods and waves his hand.

As I climb to the thirtieth floor, a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and float erratically in my stomach. Why am I so nervous? And I know it is because I have no idea what Grayson's mood was when I arrived. My inner goddess is hoping for a type of mood, my subconscious, like me, is full of nerves.

The elevator doors open and I am in the lobby. It is so strange not to be met by Stephen.

Of course, he parks the car. In the Great Room, Grayson is on his BlackBerry, talking quietly as he gazes through the glass doors at the New York City skyline in the early evening. He wears a gray suit with the jacket undone, and he runs his hand through his hair, it is. He was agitated, even tense. Oh no - what's wrong Restless or not, he is always beyond beauty. How can he look so... striking? It is such a pleasure to get up and drink in the sight of it.

'No trace... Ok... yes.' He turns around and sees me, and his whole demeanor changes.

From tension to relief to something else: a look that directly calls my inner goddess, a look of carnal sensuality, flamboyant gray eyes.

My mouth goes dry and desire blossoms in my body... whoa.

'Keep me posted,' he slams and turns off his phone as he deliberately walks towards me. I remain paralyzed as he narrows the distance between us, devouring me with his eyes. Holy shit... something is wrong - the tension in his jaw, the anxiety around his eyes.

He shrugs his jacket, undoes his black tie, and ties them both to the couch on his way to me. Then his arms are wrapped around me, and he pulls me towards him, hard, fast, gripping my poor Pittsburgh tail to lift my head, kissing me as his life depends on it. What is this mess? He painfully pulls the hair tie out of my hair, but I do not care. There is a primordial and desperate quality in her kiss. He needs me for whatever reason right now, and I have never felt so wanted and coveted. It is dark and sensual and alarming at the same time. I kiss her back with equal fervor, my fingers twisting and fisting through her hair. Our languages intertwine, our passion and our ardor burst between us. It tastes divine, hot, sexy and its scent - all shower gel and Grayson are so exciting. He pulls his mouth away from mine, and he looks at me, seized by a nameless emotion.

'What's wrong?' I breathe.

'I am so glad you are back. Shower with me - now.'

I cannot decide if this is a request or an order.

'Yes,' I whisper, and he grabs my hand, leading me out of the large room into his bedroom to his bathroom.

Once there, he frees me and runs the water in the too spacious shower.

Turning slowly, he looks at me, hooded eyes.

'I like your skirt. It is noticeably short,' he said in a deep voice. 'You have beautiful legs.'

He gets out of his shoes and bends down to remove each of his socks, never taking his eyes off me. I was speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. Wow... to be this willed by this Greek god. I reflect on his actions and step out of my black apartments. Suddenly he reaches out to me, leaning me against the wall. Kiss me, my face, my throat, my lips... running his hands through my hair. I feel the cool, smooth tiled wall behind my back as it pushes against me so that I am flattened between its warmth and the cold of the ceramic. Tentatively, I place my arms on top of his upper arms, and he moans as I squeeze him tightly.

'I want you now. Here... quick, hard,' he breathes, and his hands are on my thighs, pulling up my skirt. 'Are you still bleeding?'

'No.' I rinse.

'Good.'

His thumbs catch on my white cotton panties, and suddenly he drops to his knees pulling them. My skirt is now pulled down so that I am naked from the waist down and panting, wanting. He grabs my hips, pushes me back against the wall, and kisses me on top of my thighs. Grabbing the top of my thighs, he spreads my legs. I moaned loudly, feeling his tongue encircle my clit. Oh my. Tilting my head involuntarily back, I moan as my fingers work their way through that hair.

Her tongue is relentless, strong, and insistent, leaving me - swirling around, repeatedly - without stopping. It is exquisite, the intensity of the feeling - it is almost painful. My body starts to speed up and it frees me. What no! My breathing is irregular as I gasp, looking at him with delicious anticipation. He grabs my face with both hands, holding me tight, and he kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal.

Unzipping his fly, he frees himself, grabs the back of my thighs, and lifts me.

'Wrap your legs around me, baby,' he orders, his voice pressing, strained.

I do as I am told and wrap my arms around his neck, and he moves quickly and sharply, filling me up. Ah! He gasps and I moan. Holding my butt, his fingers digging into my soft flesh, he begins to move, slowly at first - a steady, steady rhythm... but as his control loosens, he accelerates... faster and faster. Ahhh! I tilt my head back and focus on the feeling of invasion, punishment, heavenly... pushing myself, pushing me... forward, higher, higher... and when I cannot take it anymore, I explode around

him, in an intense and devouring orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl, and he buries his head in my neck as he sinks into me, moaning loudly and incoherently as he finds his release.

His breathing is irregular, but he kisses me tenderly, not moving, still inside me, and I blink, not seeing in his eyes. As he focuses, he slowly comes out of me, holding me tight as I put my feet on the floor. The bathroom is now cloudy with steam...

and hot. I feel overdressed.

'You seem glad to see me,' I whisper with a shy smile.

His lips are raised.

'Yes, Miss Black, my pleasure is self-evident. Come - let me put you in the shower.'

He undoes the next three buttons on his shirt, takes off the cufflinks, pulls it over his head, and throws it on the floor. Takes off his suit pants and underpants, he puts them to the side. He begins to undo the buttons on my blouse as I watch him, eager to reach out and stroke his chest, but I contain myself.

'How was your trip?' he asks softly. He seems so much calmer now, his apprehension gone, dissolved by the sexual congress.

'Alright, thank you,' I whisper, still breathless. 'Thanks again for the first class. It really is a much nicer way to travel.' I smile shyly at him. 'I have news,' I added nervously.

'Oh?' he looks down at me as he undoes the last button, slips my blouse down my arms, and throws it over his discarded clothes.

'I have a job.'

He freezes, then smiles at me, his eyes warm and soft.

Congratulations, Miss Black. Now, will you tell me where?' he teases.

'You do not know?'

He shakes his head, frowning slightly.

'Why would I know that?'

'With your stalking abilities, I thought you could have...' I stop as her face drops. 'Naddalin, I would not dream of interfering in your career, unless you ask me, of course. He looks hurt.

'So you have no idea which company?'

'No. I know there are four publishing houses in New York - so this is one of them.'

'SIP'

'Oh, little one, good. Nice work.' He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

'Smart girl. When do you start?'

'Monday.'

'That soon, eh, I had better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around.'

I am embarrassed by his causal ordering but do as I ask, and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down, taking my behind as he does and kissing me on the shoulder. He leans against me and his nose rubs my hair, inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

'You poison me, Miss Black, and you calm me down. Such an exhilarating combination. He kisses my hair. Taking my hand, he pulls me into the shower.

'Ouch,' I cry out. The water is hot. Grayson smiles at me as the waterfalls on him.

'It's just a little hot water.'

And in fact, he is right. It feels heavenly, wash off Georgia's sticky morning and the stickiness of our intercourse.

'Turn around,' he orders, and I obey, turning to face the wall. 'I want to wash you'

, he whispers and takes the shower gel. He squirts a little in his hand.

'I have something else to tell you,' I whisper as her hands start on my shoulders.

'Oh yes?' he asks softly.

I hold on with a deep breath.

'My friend Sam's photography exhibit opens Thursday in Pittsburgh.'

He stops moving, his hands hovering over my breasts. I emphasized the word 'friend'.

'Yes, what about?' he asks sternly.

'I said I would go. Would you like to come with me?'

After what seems like a monumental lapse of time, he slowly begins to wash me again.

'What time?'

'The opening is at 7:30 p.m.'

He kisses my ear.

'Okay.'

Inside my subconscious relaxes then collapses, slumped in an old damaged chair. 'Were you nervous about asking me the question?'

'Yes. How can you tell?'

'Naddalin, your whole body is just relaxed,' he said dryly.

'Well, you just seem to be uh... on the jealous side.'

'Yes, I am,' he said darkly. 'And you better remember that.' But thank you for asking the question. We will take Fake and Gay.

Oh, the helicopter, of course, dumbs me. No more flying... cool! I smile.

'Can I wash you?' I ask.

'I don't think so,' he whispers, and he kisses me softly on my neck to remove the sting of his refusal. I pout at the wall as he strokes my back with soap.

'Will you ever let me touch you?' I ask boldly.

He comes to a stop again, his hand on my behind.

'Put your hands on the wall Naddalin. I will take you back,' he whispered in my ear, grabbing my hips, and I know the discussion is over.

Later we sat at the breakfast counter, dressed in bathrobes, after consuming the excellent pasta of Mrs. Jones with the vongole.

'More wine?' Grayson asks, gray eyes shining.

'A little drink, please.' The Sancerre is crunchy and delicious. Grayson pours one for me and one for himself.

'How's the um... situation that brought you to New York?' I ask shyly.

He frowns.

'Out of control,' he whispers bitterly. 'But you do not have to worry, Naddalin. I have plans for you tonight.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. I want you to be ready and be waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes.' He gets up and looks at me.

'You can get ready in your bedroom. The walk-in closet is now full of clothes for you. I do not want any argument about them.' He narrows his eyes, daring me to say something. When I do not, he walks over to his office.

Me! Chat with you, numerous Shadows is more than my butt. I sit on the barstool, momentarily stunned, trying to digest this piece of information. He bought me clothes. I roll my eyes exaggeratedly knowing full well that he cannot see me. Car, phone, computer... clothes, it will be a fucking condominium next, and then I will be his lover.

Ho! My subconscious has its sly face. I ignored her and made my way upstairs to my room so he is still mine... why I thought he had agreed to let me sleep with him.

He is not used to sharing his personal space, but neither am I. I console myself by thinking that at least I have a place to escape him.

Examining the door, it has a lock but no key. I wonder briefly if Ms. Jones has a spare. I will ask him. I open the closet door and close it quickly. Holy Crap - he spent a fortune. It looks like Maury's - so many clothes hanging neatly on the rail. Deep down, I know they will all be fine. But I do not have time to think about it - I must kneel in the red room of... pain... or pleasure - with any luck tonight.

Kneeling by the door, I am naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Damn, I thought after the bathroom he would have had enough. Man is insatiable, or all men are like him. I do not know, no one would compare it to. By closing my eyes, I try to calm down, to connect with my inner submarine. She is there somewhere, hidden behind my inner goddess.

Anticipation boils like soda through my veins. What will he do? I take a deep breath, but I cannot deny it. I am already horny, horny and it is wet and dripping with my thick shiny goodness down to my butt opening. This is so... I want to think badly, but somehow it is not. It is good for Grayson. This is what he wants - and after the last few days... , he has done, I must get up and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs.

The memory of her gaze when I came home tonight, the desire on her face, her determined step towards me as if I were an oasis in the desert. I would do anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious memory, and it reminds me that I need to part my knees. I put them aside. How long will he make me wait? The wait paralyzes me, paralyzes me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I take a glance around the subtly lit room; the cross, the table, the sofa, the bench... this bed. It is so big and made up of red satin sheets. What device will he use?

The door opens and Grayson enters, ignoring me completely. I quickly look down, fixing my hands, positioned carefully on my spread thighs. Placing something on the large chest next to the door, he casually walks over to the bed. I let myself go to take a glance at him and my heart almost stops. He is naked except for those soft ripped jeans, the top button was casually undone. Damn, he looks so hot. My

subconscious fires frantically, and my inner goddess swings and writhes in a primitive carnal rhythm. She is so ready. I lick my lips instinctively. My blood runs through my body, thick and heavy with salacious hunger. What will he do to me?

Turning around, he casually walks back to the dresser. By opening one, he starts removing objects and placing them on top. My curiosity burns, even burns, but I resist the overwhelming temptation to take a quick look. When he has finished what he is doing, he comes to stand in front of me. I can see her bare feet, and I want to kiss every square inch of it... run my tongue over her instep, suck on each of her toes. Holy shit.

'You look lovely,' he hisses.

I keep my head down, aware that he is staring at me as I am naked. I feel the redness as it slowly spreads across my face. He leans in and takes my chin, forcing my face to meet his gaze.

'You are a beautiful woman, Naddalin. And you are all mine,' he whispers. 'Get up.' His order is sweet and full of sensual promises.

Shaking, I get up.

'Look at me,' he breathes, and I look at his burning gray gaze. It is her Dom look - cold, hard, and sexy as hell, seven shades of sin in one seductive gaze. My mouth is dry and I know I will do whatever he asks me to. An almost cruel smile passes over his lips.

'We do not have a signed contract, Naddalin. But we discussed the limits. And I want to reiterate that we have safe words, okay?'

Holy shit... what is he planning for me to need safe words?

'What are they?' he asks with authority.

I frown slightly at her question, and her face noticeably hardens.

'What are the safe words, Naddalin?' he said slowly and deliberately.

'Yellow,' I mumble.

'And?'

He calls out, his mouth sticking up in a hard line.

'Red', I breathe.

'Remember this.'

And I cannot help it... I raise my eyebrows at him and am about to remind him of my surrogacy, but the sudden frosty glow in his icy gray eyes stops me in my tracks.

'Don't start with your smart mouth here, Miss Black. Or I will fuck her with you on her knees. Do you understand?'

I instinctively swallow. Okay. I blink quickly, berated. It is his tone of voice, rather than the threat, that intimidates me.

'Good?'

'Yes, sir,' I mumble hastily.

'Good girl,' he stops, staring at me. 'My intention is not that you must keep the word because you are in pain. What I intend to do to you will be intense. Very intense, and you must guide me. Do you understand?'

Not really. Intense - Wow.

'It is a matter of touching, Naddalin. You will not be able to see me or hear me. But you will be able to feel me.'

I frown - cannot hear it. How is this going to work? It spins, and I had not noticed that above the chest is a sleek, flat, matte black box. As he waves his hand in front, the box splits in two: two sliding doors open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. Grayson presses several of these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens, but he seems satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me, he wears his little smile, I have a secret.

'I will tie you to this bed, Naddalin. But I will blindfold you first and, 'he reveals his iPod in his hand, 'You will not be able to hear me. All you will hear is the music I will play for you.'

Okay. A musical interlude, not what I expected. Does he ever do what I expect?

Damn, I hope this is not rap.

'Come.' Taking my hand, he leads me to the old four-poster bed. There are shackles attached to each corner, thin metal chains with leather cuffs, which shine against the red satin.

Oh boy, my heart is going to leave my chest, and I am melting from the inside out, the desire running through me. Could I be more excited?

'Stay here.'

I am facing the bed. He leans in and whispers in my ear.

'Wait here, keep your eyes on the bed. Imagine lying here bound and totally at my mercy.'

Oh my.

He walks away for a moment, and I can hear him near the door looking for something.

All my senses are hyper-alert, my hearing more acute. He picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles near the door. Holy cow. What will he do?

I can feel it behind me. He takes my hair, pulls it in a ponytail behind me, and starts to braid it.

'Although I love your braids, Naddalin, I am too impatient to be against you right now. So it will have to be done. Her voice is low, soft.'

His deft fingers brush my back now and then as they work through my hair, and every occasional touch is like a gentle electric shock against my skin. He ties the end with a tie, then gently pulls the braid so I must back up against him. He pulls to the side again so that I tilt my head, giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning down, he strokes my neck. Tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder.

He hums softly as he does, and the sound echoes through me. Right down... right over there inside of me. Unwavering, I moan softly.

'Hush now,' he breathes against my skin. He raises his hands in front of me, his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a whip. I remember the name of my first introduction to this room.

'Touch him,' he whispers, and he looks like the devil himself. My body ignites in response. Tentatively, I reach out and brush the long strands. It has many long slings, all the soft suede with small beads at the end.

'I will use that. It will not hurt, but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you overly sensitive.'

Oh, he says it will not hurt.

'What are the safe words, Naddalin?'

'Uh... yellow and red, sir,' I whisper.

'Good girl. Remember, most of your fear is in your mind.'

He drops the whip onto the bed and his hands move to my waist.

'You won't need them,' he whispers and hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step away from it with an unsteady step, supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

'Stay still,' he orders and kisses me behind then gently pinches me twice, making me tense. 'Now lie down. Face up,' he adds, hitting me hard on the butt, making me jump.

Hastily, I crawl onto the hard, inflexible mattress of the bed and lay down, looking up at him. The satin of the sheet under me feels soft and cool against my skin. His gaze is impassive, except for his eyes which shine with barely leashed excitement.

'Hands above your head,' he orders, and I do as I suggest.

Damn, my body is hungry for him. I already want it.

He turns around, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch him wander over to the dresser, coming back with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask, like the one I used on my flight. Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile, but I cannot seem to get my lips to cooperate. I am too wrapped up in anticipation. I just know my face is completely still, my eyes huge, as I look at him.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he shows me the iPod. He has a strange antenna device as well as headphones. So bizarre. I frown trying to figure this out.

'It sends what's playing on the iPod to the system in the room.' Grayson answers my unspoken question by tapping on the little antenna. 'I can hear what you hear and I have a remote control for it.' He smiles with his private joke smile and holds up a small, flat device that looks like a very trendy calculator. He leans across me, gently pushes the headphones into my ears, and sets the iPod somewhere on the bed above my head.

'Lift your head,' he orders, and I do so immediately.

Slowly he slips off the mask, pulling the rubber band over the back of my head, and I am blind. The elastic of the mask keeps the headphones in place. I can still hear him, although the sound is muffled as he gets up from the bed. I am deafened by my breathing - it is shallow and erratic, reflecting my arousal. Grayson takes my left arm, gently stretches it to the left corner, and ties the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he has done. Oh! Its touch causes a delicious and ticklish thrill. I hear him slowly move to the other side, take my right arm, and handcuff it. Again, his long fingers linger along my arm. Oh my... I am already fit to burst. Why is it so erotic?

He moves down the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

'Raise your head,' he orders.

I obey, and he drags me onto the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost stretched out at the wrists. Holy cow, I cannot move my arms. A shiver of apprehension mixed with tantalizing exhilaration runs through my body, making me wetter. I moan. Separating my legs, he handcuffs my right ankle first, then my left, so I am staked, quartered, and vulnerable to him. It is so annoying that I cannot see it. I listen loudly... to what he is doing and hear nothing, just my breathing and the thud of my heart as the blood beats furiously against my eardrums.

Suddenly, the soft silent hiss and sound of the iPod come to life. From inside my head, a lonely angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long, sweet note, and it is joined almost immediately by another voice, then other voices - Holy Cow, a heavenly choir - singing acapella in my head, an ancient and ancient hymn. What name of Heaven have I never heard of anything like it? Something unbearably soft

brushes my neck, flowing languidly down my throat, slowly over my chest, over my breasts, stroking me... pulling on my nipples, it is so soft, brushing underneath. It is so unexpected. It is fur!

A fur glove?

Grayson drags his hand, unhurried and deliberate, up to my stomach, circling my navel, then carefully from hip to hip, and I try to anticipate where he is going next... but the music... c is in my head... carrying me... the fur through the line of my pubic hair... between my legs, down my thighs, down one leg... up the other... it tickles... but not quite.. more voices join... the ch SPOTLIGHT c heavenly Father singing all distinct parts, their voices mingling with happiness and sweetness in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I have ever heard. I catch a word - 'deus' - and realize that they are singing in Latin. And yet the fur is moving down my arms and around my waist... back onto my breasts. My nipples harden from the soft-touch... and I gasp... I wonder where her hand will go next. Suddenly the fur is gone, and I can feel the whip fronds running over my skin, following the same path as the fur, and it is so hard to focus with the music in my head - it sounds like a hundred singing voices, weaving an ethereal tapestry of silky fine gold and silver in my head, mixed with the feel of soft suede against my skin... dragging over me... oh my... suddenly she disappears. Then suddenly, it bites my stomach.

'Aagghh! I scream. It takes me by surprise, and it does not hurt, but tingling all over the place, and it hits me again. Stronger.

'Aaah!

I want to move, to twist... to escape, or to welcome every hit... I do not know - it is so overwhelming... I cannot pull my arms..... my legs are stuck... I am held very firmly in place... and again he hits my breasts - I scream. And it is a sweet agony - bearable, just... pleasant - no, not immediately, but as my skin sings with each stroke in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head, I am drawn into a dark, dark part of my psyche which surrenders to this most erotic sensation. Yes - I understand that. He hits me on my hip. Then it moves in quick strokes on my pubic hair, on my thighs, and on the inside of my thighs... and my body... on my hips. It continues as the music climaxes, then suddenly - the music stops. And him too. Then the singing starts again... building and building, and it is raining blows on me... and I moan and twist. Again it ceases and all is calm... except my wild breathing... and my wild desire. Too... oh...

what is happening? What is he going to do now? The excitement is almost unbearable. I entered a very dark carnal place.

The bed shifts and moves when I feel it climbing over me, and the song starts again. He repeated it... this time it is his nose and lips replacing the fur... running down my neck and throat, kissing me, sucking... down to my breasts... Ah! Taunting each of my nipples in turn... his tongue swirls around one as his fingers relentlessly tease the other... I moan, loudly I think, although I cannot hear. I am lost. Lost in him... lost in the astral and seraphic voices... lost in all the sensations that I cannot escape... I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

He descends towards my stomach - his tongue circling my navel - following the path of the whip and the fur... I moan. He kisses, sucks and nibbles... moves south...

-And-

Then his tongue is there. At the junction of my thighs. I throw my head back and scream as I almost explode to orgasm... I am on the brink, and he stops.

No! The bed moves and he kneels between my legs. He leans towards the bedpost and the cuff on my ankle is suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed... resting it against him. He leans over to the opposite post and releases my other leg. His hands travel rapidly down both of my legs, squeezing and kneading, bringing them back to life. Then, grabbing my hips, he lifts me so my back is off the bed. I am arched, resting on my shoulders. What he is kneeling between my legs... and in a quick, snapping motion he is inside of me... oh damn... and I am screaming again. The thrill of my impending orgasm begins, and it freezes. The quiver dies... oh no... it will torture me further.

'Please!' I am crying.

He squeezes me tighter... as a warning, I do not know, his fingers digging into the flesh of my butt as I remained panting... so I stopped voluntarily. Very slowly, he begins to move again... out than in... excruciatingly slowly. Holy shit - Please! I am screaming inside... And as the number of voices in the choir room increases... its rhythm, infinitely, it is so controlled... so in tune with the music. And I cannot take it anymore.

'Please,' I beg you, and with a quick movement he pulls me back down onto the bed, and he is lying on top of me, his hands on the bed next to my breasts as he supports her weight and it sinks into me. As the music climaxes, I fall... in free fall... into the most intense and scary orgasm I have ever had, and Grayson follows me... pushing hard inside me, three once more... then collapsing on top of me.

As my consciousness returns from wherever it has been, Grayson withdraws from me. The music has stopped and I can feel him stretch over my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I moan as my hand is released. He quickly releases my other hand, gently removes the mask from my eyes, and removes the headphones. I blink in the soft faint light and fix his intense gray gaze.

'Hi,' he whispers.

'Hi yourself,' I replied shyly. His lips move into a smile, and he leans in and kisses me softly.

'Well done, you,' he whispers. 'Turnover.'

Holy shit - what is he gonna do now? Her eyes soften.

'I'm just going to rub your shoulders.'

'Oh okay.'

I roll stiffly across my forehead. I am so tired. Grayson sits astride me and begins to massage my shoulders. I moan loudly - he has such strong and knowledgeable fingers. Leaning down, he kisses my head.

'What was that music?' I mumble inarticulately.

'It's called Spem In Alium, or the forty-part motet, by Thomas Tallis.'

'It was... overwhelming.'

'I always wanted to fuck with that.'

'Not another first, Mr. Maury?'

'Indeed, Miss Black.'

I moan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

'Well, this is my first time fucking with this too,' I whisper sleepily.

'Hmm... you and I are giving each other many firsts.' His voice is down to earth.

'What did I tell you in my sleep, Ch - uh, sir?'

His hands interrupt their healing for a moment.

'You said a lot of things, Naddalin. You said cages and strawberries... that you wanted more... and that you missed me.'

Oh, thank God for that.

'Is that all?' The relief in my voice is evident.

Grayson stops his divine message and moves so that he lies down next to me. His head resting on his elbow. He frowns.

'What did you think you said?'

Oh shit.

'That I thought you were ugly, conceited, and hopeless in bed.'

His crease on his forehead deepens.

'Well, of course I am all of these things, and now you really intrigue me.' What are you hiding from me, Miss Black?

I blink my eyes at him innocently.

'I'm not hiding anything.'

'Naddalin, you are a hopeless liar.'

'I thought you were going to make me laugh after sex, it's not for me.'

His lips are raised.

'I can't tell jokes.'

'Mr. Maury! Something you cannot do?' I smile at him and he smiles back at me.

'No, hopeless joke-teller.' He looks so proud of himself that I start to laugh.

'I'm also a hopeless joke-teller.'

'It's such a lovely sound,' he whispers, and leans forward and kisses me.

'And you are hiding something, Naddalin. I might have to torture him.'

I wake up with a shake. I just fell down a staircase in a dream, and I sit up, momentarily disoriented. It is dark and I am alone in Grayson's bed. Something woke me up, a nagging thought. I glance at the alarm clock on his bedside. It is 5 a.m., but I feel rested. Why is it? Oh - it is the jet lag - it would be 8:00 am in Georgia. Holy shit... I need to take my pill. I climb out of bed, grateful for everything that has woken me up. I hear low notes from the piano. Grayson is playing. I must see it. I love to watch him play. Naked, I take my bathrobe from the chair and walk quietly down the hall, putting on my bathrobe and listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament coming from the great room.

Shrouded in darkness, Grayson sits in a bubble of light as he plays, and his hair shines in burnished coppery highlights. He looks naked, even though I know he is wearing his pajamas

funds. He concentrates, plays beautifully, lost in the melancholy of the music. I hesitate, looking out of the shadows, not wanting to interrupt. I want to hold it.

He looks lost, sad even, and painfully lonely - or it is just the music that is so full of poignant sadness. It ends the song, pauses for a split second, then starts playing it again.

I walk cautiously towards him, drawn like the moth to the flame... the idea makes me smile.

He looks at me and frowns before his gaze returns to his hands. Oh shit, is he upset that I am bothering him?

'You should be asleep,' he growls softly.

I can tell he is worried about something.

'And you too,' I retorted not so quietly.

He looks up again, his lips twisting with a hint of a smile.

'Are you scolding me, Miss Black?'

'Yes, Mr. Maury, I am.'

'Well, I can't sleep.' He frowns once more as a trace of irritation or anger crosses his face. With me, certainly not.

I ignore his facial expression and very courageously sit next to him on the piano stool, placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his nimble and dexterous fingers stroke the keys. It pauses fractionally, then continues until the end of the song.

'What was that?' I ask gently.

'Chopin. Opus 28, number 4. In E minor, if that interests you,' he whispers.

'I am always interested in what you do.'

He turns and gently presses his lips against my hair.

'I didn't mean to wake you up.'

'You did not. Play the other one.'

'Another?'

'The Bach piece you played the first night I stayed.'

'Oh, Marcel.'

He begins to play slowly and deliberately. I feel the movement of his hands on his shoulder as I lean against him and close my eyes. Sad, moving notes swirl slowly and sadly around us, echoing off the walls. It is a piece of haunting beauty, even sadder than the Chopin, and I lose myself in the beauty of the lament. It reflects how I feel. The deep and moving desire that I must know this extraordinary man better, to try to understand his sadness. Too soon, the play ends.

'Why do you only play such sad music?'

I sit up straight and watch him as he shrugs in response to my question, his expression suspicious: 'So you were only six when you started playing?' I invited him.

He nods, his suspicious gaze intensifying. After a while, he volunteered.

'I started learning the piano to please my new mother.'

'To fit into the perfect family?'

'Yes' he said evasively. 'Why are you awake, you don't need to recover from yesterday's efforts?'

'It is 8 am for me. And I must take my pill.'

He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

'Well remembered,' he whispers, and I can tell he is impressed. His lips curl up in a half-smile.

'Only you would start a course of specific birth control pills by the hour in a different time zone. You would have to wait half an hour, then another half hour tomorrow morning.'

So eventually you can take them at a reasonable time.'

'Good plan', I breathe. 'So what will we do for half an hour?' I blink innocently at him.

'I can think of several things,' he smirked, his gray eyes shining. I look back impassively as my insides tighten and melt under his knowing gaze.

'On the other hand, we could talk,' I suggest quietly.

His forehead creases.

'I prefer what I have in mind.' He brings me back to his knees.

'You'd always rather have sex than talk,' I laughed, stabilizing myself as I held his upper arms.

'True. Especially with you.' He rubs my hair and begins a steady trail of kisses from below my ear to my throat. 'Maybe on my piano,' he whispers.

Oh my. My whole body tightens at the thought. Piano. Wow.

'I want to fix something,' I whisper as my pulse begins to quicken, and my inner goddess closes her eyes, reveling in the feel of her lips on me.

He pauses momentarily before continuing his sensual assault.

'Always so hungry for information, Miss Black. What needs to be addressed?' he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck, continuing his soft gentle kisses.

'Us,' I whisper, closing my eyes.

'Hmm. How about us?' He stops his trail of kisses down my shoulder.

'The contract.'

He lifts his head to look at me, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and sighs. He strokes his fingers on my cheek.

'Well, the contract is moot, isn't it?' Her voice is low and hoarse, her eyes soft.

'Questionable.' He smiles. I look at him questioningly.

'But you were so excited.'

'Well, that was before. Either way, the rules are not theoretical, they still apply.' His expression hardened slightly.

'Before, before what?'

'Before,'... He pauses, and the suspicious expression returns, 'more.' He shrugs his shoulders.

'Oh.'

'Besides, we've been to the rec room twice now, and you haven't run screaming for the hills.'

'Do you expect me to do this?'

'Nothing is expected of you, Naddalin,' he said dryly.

'So, let me be clear. You just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract all the time but not the rest of the contract?'

'Except in the rec room. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the rec room, and yes, I want you to follow the rules - all the time. So I know you will be safe, and I will be able to have you whenever I want.'

'What if I break anyof the rules?'

'Then I'll punish you.'

'But won't you need my permission?'

'Yes.'

'What if I say no?'

He looks at me for a moment, with a confused expression.

'If you say no, you will say no. I am going to have to find a way to persuade you.'

I step away from him and get up. I need some distance. He frowns as I watch him. He looks puzzled and suspicious again.

'So the punishment aspect remains.'

'Yes, but only if you break the rules.'

'I'll need to read them again,' I said, trying to remember the details.

'I'll get them for you.' His tone is suddenly professional.

Whoa. It got serious so quickly. He gets up from the piano and walks slowly to his desk. My scalp itches. Damn, I need some tea. The future of our so-called relationship is discussed at 5:45 a.m. when he is preoccupied with something else.

Is it wise that I go to the kitchen which is still shrouded in darkness? Where are the light switches? I find them, turn them on, and pour water into the kettle. My pill! I rumble in my purse that I left on the breakfast counter and find them quickly. A swallow and I are done. By the time I am done, Grayson is back, sitting on one of the bar stools, watching me intently.

'Here is.' He pushes a piece of typed paper towards me and I notice he is crossed out some things.

RULES

Obedience:

The Submissive will obey all instructions given by the Dominant immediately, without hesitation or reservation, and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will accept any sexual activity deemed suitable and pleasurable by the Dominant, except those activities which are described within strict limits (Annex A.) She will do so with eagerness and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure that she achieves a minimum of eight hours of sleep per night when not with The Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and well-being from a list of prescribed foods (Appendix 4.) The Submissive will not snack between meals, except for fruit.

Clothing:

With The Dominant, The Submissive will only wear clothing approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for the Submitter, which the Submitter will use. The Dominant will accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.

Exercise:

The Dominant will provide the Submitter with a personal trainer four three times per week in one-hour sessions, at times to be mutually agreed upon between the personal trainer and the Submitter. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on the progress of The Submissive.

Personal hygiene / Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or always shaved. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon selected by The Dominant at times

determined by The Dominant, and undergo such treatment as The Dominant deems appropriate.

Personal security:

The submissive does not drink excessively, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in unnecessary danger.

Personal qualities:

The Submissive will not enter any sexual relationship with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will always conduct herself respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of The Dominant. It will be held responsible for any mischief, wrongdoing, and misconduct committed outside the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above conditions will result in immediate punishment, the nature of which will be determined by the Dominant.

'So the obedience thing still holds?'

'Oh yes.' He smiles.

I shake my head amused, and before I know it, I roll my eyes at him.

'Did you just roll your eyes at me, Naddalin?' He breathes.

Oh fuck.

'Maybe, it depends on your reaction.'

'As always,' he said, shaking his head slightly, his eyes shining with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a thrill of elation runs through me.

'So...' Holy shit. What am I going to do?

'Yes?' He licks his lower lip.

'You want to spank me now.'

'Yes. And I will.'

'Oh, really, Mr. Maury?' I challenge him by smiling. Two people can play this game.

'Are you going to stop me?'

'You're going to have to catch me first.'

His eyes widen a little, and he smiles, standing up slowly.

'Oh, really, Miss Black?'

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been so grateful for its existence as I am now.

'And you bite your lip,' he hisses, slowly moving to his left as I walk over to mine.

'You wouldn't,' I tease. 'After all, you roll your eyes.' I try to reason with him. He continues to move to his left, just like me.

'Yes, but you've just raised the bar for excitement with this game.' His eyes shine and mad anticipation emanates from him.

'I'm pretty quick you know.' I try nonchalance.

'So I am.'

He is stalking me, in his kitchen.

'Are you going to come quietly?' he asks.

'Have I already done this?'

'Miss Black, what do you mean?' he smiles. 'It will be worse for you if I have to get you.'

'It is only if you catch me, Grayson. And right now, I do not plan to let you catch me.'

'Naddalin, you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct violation of rule number seven.'

'I have been in danger since I met you, Mr. Maury, rules or no rules.'

'Yes you have.' He pauses and his forehead furrows slightly.

Suddenly he rushes over to me, making me scream and run to the dining room table. I do it to escape, setting the table between us. My heart is pounding and the adrenaline rushed through my body... boy... it is so exciting. I am a kid again, though that is not fair. I watch him intently as he deliberately walks towards me. I digress.

'You sure know how to distract a man, Naddalin.

``We aim to please Mr. Maury. Distract yourself from what?

'Life. The universe.' He waves one of his hands vaguely.

'You seemed very concerned while you were playing.'

He stops and crosses his arms, his expression amused.

'We can do this all day, baby, but I'll get you, and it'll just be worse for you when I do.' 'No, you won't.' I must not be overconfident. I repeat it like a mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes, and she is on the starting blocks.

'anyone would think you don't want me to catch you.'

'I do not. That is the point. I feel the punishment the way you feel when I touch you.' His whole behavior changes in a nanosecond. Gone is the Grayson player, and he looks at me like I slapped him. He is ashy.

'Is that how you feel?' he whispers.

These four words, and the way he pronounces them, say a lot. Oh no. They tell me so much more about him and how he feels. They tell me about his fear and his hatred. I frown.

No, I do not feel so bad. Certainly not. Do I?

'No. It does not affect me that much, but it does give you an idea,' I whisper, looking at him anxiously.

'Oh,' he said.

Shit. He looks completely and utterly lost like I pulled the rug out from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath, I walk around the table until I find myself in front of him, looking him in his worried eyes.

'Do you hate it that much?' he breathes, his eyes filled with horror.

'Well... no,' I reassure him. Jeez - is that how he feels when people touch him?

'No. I feel ambivalent about it. I do not like it, but I do not hate it.'

'But last night in the playroom you...' He pauses.

'I am doing it for you, Grayson, because you need it. I do not. You did not hurt me last night.'

It was in a different context, and I can rationalize that internally, and I trust you. But when you want to punish me, I am afraid you will hurt me. '

His gray eyes shine like a turbulent storm. Time moves expand, and recedes before it responds softly.

'I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything you could not stand.'

Shit!

'Why?'

He runs his hand through his hair and shrugs.

'I just need it.' He pauses, looks at me in anguish, closes his eyes, and shakes his head. 'I can't tell you,' he whispers.

'Can't or can't?'

'Habit.'

'So you know why.'

'Yes.'

'But you won't tell me.'

'If I do, you'll run screaming from this room, and you'll never want to go back there again.' He looks at me suspiciously. 'I cannot risk this, Naddalin.

'You want me to stay.'

'More than you think. I could not bear to lose you.'

Oh my.

He looks at me, and suddenly he hugs me and kisses me, kisses me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise, and I feel his panic and his desperate need in his kiss.

'Don't leave me. You said you would not leave me, and you begged me not to leave you, in your sleep,' he whispered against my lips.

Oh... my nightly confessions.

'I do not want to go.' And my heart sinks, turning around.

He is a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious, but he is lost... somewhere in its darkness. His eyes wide and dreary and tortured. I can calm him down. Join him briefly in the dark and bring him into the light.

'Show me,' I whisper.

'To show you?'

'Show me how bad it can hurt.'

'What?'

'Punish me. I want to know how bad this can get.'

Grayson pulls away from me, completely confused.

'Would you try?'

'Yes. I said I would.' But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for him, he will let me touch him.

He blinks at me.

'Naddalin, you are so confusing.'

'I am confused too. I am trying to work this out. And you and I will know, finally, if I can do this. If I can handle this, then maybe you -' My words fail me, and his eyes widen again. He knows I am referring to the tactile thing. For a moment he looks torn, but then a steely resolution settles on his features, and he narrows his eyes, looking at me speculatively as if he is weighing alternatives.

Abruptly, he squeezes my arm in a firm grip and turns around, leading me out of the great room, up the stairs, and into the playroom. Pleasure and pain, reward, and punishment - his words from so long ago resonate in my mind.

'I'll show you how bad this can be, and you can make up your mind.' He stops near the door. 'Are you ready for this?'

I nod, my decision is made, and I am vaguely dizzy, weak as all the blood leaves my face. He opens the door, and still grabbing my arm, grabs what looks like a belt on the rack next to the door, then leads me to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

'Lean over the bench,' he whispers.

Okay. I can do it. I bend over the soft, smooth leather. He left my bathrobe.

In a quiet part of my brain, I am vaguely surprised that he did not have me remove it. Fuck, it is gonna hurt... I know. My subconscious has faded and my inner goddess is trying to appear brave.

'We're here because you said yes, Naddalin. And you ran away from me. I will hit you six times, and you will count with me.'

Why does not he get along? He always makes such a meal punishing me. I roll my eyes, knowing full well that he cannot see me.

He lifts the hem of my robe, and for some reason, it feels more intimate than being naked. He gently strokes my butt, running his warm hand over both cheeks and up to the top of my thighs.

'I'm doing this so that you remember not to run away from me, and as exciting as it is, I never want you to run away from me,' he whispered.

-And-

The iroPittsburgh is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he had opened his arms, I would run towards him, near to him.

'And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about this.' Suddenly it is gone- that nervous, nervous fear in his voice. He is back wherever he is. I hear it in his tone, in the way he places his fingers on my back, holding me - and the atmosphere in the room changes.

I close my eyes, bracing for the blow. It comes hard, slamming on my back, and the belt bite is all I was worried about. I scream involuntarily and take a huge gulp of air.

'Count, Naddalin!' He commands.

'A!' I yell at him and it sounds like a curse.

It hits me again, and the pain throbs and echoes along the beltline. Holy shit... clever.

'Of them!' I scream. It is so good to scream.

His breathing is irregular and hard. While mine is almost nonexistent as I desperately dig around my psyche for internal strength. The belt cuts my flesh again.

'Three!' The unwelcome tears welled up in my eyes. Damn - it is harder than I thought - so much harder than spanking. He does not hold back anything.

'Four! I scream as the belt bites me again, and now tears are streaming down my face.

I do not want to cry. It makes me angry that I cry. He hits me again.

'Five.' My voice is more of a strangled, strangled sob, and right now I hate it. One more, I can make one more. I feel like my back is on fire.

'Six,' I whisper as the searing pain crosses me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me, and he pulls me into his arms, breathless and compassionate... and I do not want any of him...

'Let go... no...' And I find myself fighting his grip, pushing him away. Fight it.

'Do not touch me!' I whistle. I sit up and look at him, and he looks at me like I could explode, gray eyes wide, puzzled. I angrily throw tears from my eyes with the backs of my hands, staring at him.

'Is that what you really love me like?' I use the sleeve of the robe to wipe my nose.

He looks at me suspiciously.

'Well, you're a fucked up son of a bitch.'

'Naddalin,' he pleads, shocked.

'Don't dare, Naddalin me! You must sort your shit, Maury!' And with that, I turn around stiffly, and walk out of the playroom, shutting the door quietly behind me.

I squeeze the doorknob behind me and lean briefly against the door. Where to go?

Am I running? I am so mad, angry burning tears roll down my cheeks, and I part them with fury. I just wanna curl up. Relax and recover somehow. Heal my broken faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course, it hurts.

Temporarily, I rub my back. Aah! It is painful. Where to go Not his room. My room, or the room that will be mine, no, is mine... was mine. That is why he wanted me to keep him. He knew I would need to get away from him.

I set off stiffly in that direction, aware that Grayson can follow me. It is still dark in the room, dawn is just a whisper on the horizon. I awkwardly climb into bed, being careful not to sit on my aching, tender back. I keep the robe on, wrap it around me, curl up and let go - sobbing loudly into my pillow.

What was I thinking? Why did I let him do this to me? I wanted the darkness to explore how bad it could be - but it is too dark for me. I can not do that. Yet that is what he does, that is how he gets his kicks.

What a monumental awakening. And to be fair to him, he warned me and warned me, repeatedly. It is not normal. He has needs that I cannot meet. I realize it now.

I do not want him to hit me like that again, ever. I think about the two or three times he hit me and how easy he was on me in comparison. Is it enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I will lose it. He will not want to be with me if I cannot give this to him.

Why, why, why did I fall in love with numerous Shadows? Why can't I love Sam, or Paul Eastwood, or someone like me?

Oh, his distraught look when I left. I was so cruel, so shocked by the savagery... will he forgive me... will I forgive him? My thoughts are all out of order and confused, echoing, and bouncing inside my skull. My subconscious shakes its head sadly, and my inner goddess is nowhere to be found. Oh, it is a dark soul morning for me. I am so lonely. I want my mom. I remember his farewell words at the airport, Follow your heart, honey, and please try not to think too much. Relax and enjoy. You are so young, darling, you have so much to live for, let it happen.

You deserve the best of everything.

I followed my heart, and my ass hurt and an anguished, broken mind to show. I must go. This is it... I must go. He is not good for me and I am not good for him. How can we make this work? And the thought of never seeing him again practically chokes me... my numerous Shadows.

I hear the door open. Oh no - there it is. He puts something on the bedside table, and the bed moves under his weight as he climbs up behind me.

'Hush,' he hisses, and I want to get away from him, get to the other side of the bed, but I am paralyzed. I cannot move and lie stiffly, not giving in at all. 'Don't beat me, Naddalin, please,' he whispers. Slowly, he takes me in his arms, buries his nose in my hair, kisses my neck.

'Don't hate me,' he breathes softly against my skin, his voice painfully sad. My heart tightens again and releases another wave of silent sobs. He continues to kiss me softly, tenderly, but I remain distant and suspicious.

We have been lying together like this, saying nothing for centuries. He just holds me, and very gradually I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes, and the soft light becomes brighter as the morning progresses, and we still lie.

'I bought you Advil and Arnica Cream,' he said after a long moment.

I turn very slowly in his arms so that I can face him. I lay my head on his arm. His eyes are flint gray and guarded.

I look at her beautiful face. He does not give anything, but he keeps his eyes on mine, barely blinking. Oh, he is so breathtakingly beautiful. In such a brief time he has become so Dear, to me. Reaching out, I stroke her cheek and run my fingers through her stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales slightly.

'I'm sorry,' I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled.

'Why?'

'What I said.'

'You didn't tell me anything that I didn't know.' And her eyes soften with relief. 'I'm sorry I hurt you.'

I shrug my shoulders.

'I asked for it.' And now I know. I swallow. Here is. I need to say my piece. 'I don't think I can be whatever you want me to be,' I whisper. His eyes widen slightly and he blinks, his frightened expression returning.

'You are everything I want you to be.'

What?

'I do not understand. I am not obedient, and you can be sure that I will not let you do this to me again. And that is what you need, you said it.'

He closes his eyes again and I can see a myriad of emotions run through his face. When he opens them again, his expression is dark. Oh no.

'You're right. I should let you go. I am no good for you.'

My scalp stings as every hair follicle in my body grab attention, and the world moves away from me, leaving a wide yawning abyss into which I fall. Oh no.

'I don't want to go,' I whisper. Damn - that is it. Pay or play. Tears are swimming in my eyes once more.

'I don't want you to go either,' he whispers harshly. He reaches out and gently strokes my cheek and wipes a falling tear with his thumb. 'I have been alive since I met you.' His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

'Me too,' I whisper, 'I fell in love with you, Grayson.'

Her eyes widen again, but this time with pure, undiluted fear.

'No,' he breathes as if I have cut off his wind.

Oh no.

'You cannot love me, Naddalin. No... that is wrong.' He is horrified.

'False, why is this wrong?'

'Well, look at you. I cannot make you happy.' Her voice is distressed.

'But you make me happy.' I frown.

'Not at the moment, I'm not doing what I want to do.'

Holy shit. It is. That is what it boils down to - incompatibility - and all these poor subs come to mind.

'We're never going to get past that, are we?' I whisper my scalp prickling with fear.

He shakes his head sadly. I close my eyes. I cannot bear to watch it.

'Well... I had better go, then,' I whispered, wincing as I sit down.

'No, don't go.' He looks panicked.

'There's no point in me staying. Suddenly I feel tired, really dog tired, and I want to go now. I get out of bed and Grayson follows him.'

'I am going to get dressed. I would like some privacy,' I said, my voice flat and empty as I left him standing in the bedroom.

Going down, I threw a glance in the hall, thinking that a few hours earlier I had laid my head on his shoulder while playing the piano. So much has happened since.

I had my eyes open and saw the extent of his depravity, and now I know that he is not capable of loving - of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have come true. And strangely, it is very liberating.

The pain is such that I refuse to recognize it. I feel numb. I slipped out of my body and am now a casual observer of this unfolding tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically, only thinking about every second in front of me. Now squeeze the bottle of shower gel. Put the bottle of shower gel back on the holder. Rub the rag over your face, shoulders... repeatedly, all simple, mechanical actions, requiring simple mechanical thoughts.

I finish my shower - and since I have not washed my hair, I can dry myself off quickly. I get dressed in the bathroom, taking my jeans and my t-shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans are rubbing against my back, but frankly, whispered in that I salute as it distracts my mind from what is happening to my broken and shattered heart.

I bend down to close my suitcase, and the bag with Grayson's present catches my eye, a modeling kit for a Blahnik L23 glider, something to build for him. Tears threaten. Oh no... happier times when there was more hope. I take it out of the holster, knowing that I must

give him. Quickly, I tear a small piece of paper from my notebook, hastily scribble a note for it, and leave it on top of the box.

I look at myself in the mirror. A pale, haunted ghost is watching me. I pick up my hair in a ponytail and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from crying. My subconscious nods in approval. Even she knows not to be sneaky right now. I cannot believe my world is crumbling around me in a barren heap of ashes, all my hopes and dreams are sorely shattered. No, no, do not think about it. Not now, not yet. Taking a deep breath, I grab my suitcase, and after putting the glider kit and my note on her pillow, I head to the great room.

Grayson is on the phone. He is dressed in black jeans and a t-shirt. His feet are bare.

'What did he say!' he cries, making me jump. 'Well, he could have told us the fucking truth. What is his number, I must call him... Welch, that is real shit.' He looks up and does not leave his dark, brooding eyes. 'Find her,' he snaps and flips the switch.

I walk over to the couch and retrieve my backpack, doing my best to ignore it. I pull out the Mac and head back to the kitchen, placing it neatly on the breakfast bar, along with the BlackBerry and the car key. When I turn to face him, he looks at me in horror.

'I need the money Stephen got for my Beetle.' My voice is clear and calm, without emotion... extraordinary.

'Naddalin, I don't want these things, they're yours,' he said incredulously. 'Please take them.'

'No Grayson - I only accepted them in pain - and I don't want them anymore.'

'Naddalin, be reasonable,' he scolds me, even now.

'I do not want anything that reminds me of you. I just need the money Stephen got for my car.' My voice is quite monotonous.

He gasps.

'Are you really trying to hurt me?'

'No.' I frown at him. Of course not... I love you. 'I am not. I am trying to protect myself,' I whisper. Because you do not want me as I want you.

'Please, Naddalin, take this stuff.'

'Grayson, I don't want to fight - I just need the money.'

He narrows his eyes, but I am no longer intimidated by him. Well, only a little. I look back impassively, without blinking or stepping back.

'Would you like to take a check?' he said sourly.

'Yes. You are good at it.'

He is not smiling, he just turns on his heel and walks into his office. I take one last lingering look around her apartment - at the art on the walls - all abstract, serene, cool... cold, even. Fit, I thought distractedly. My eyes turn to the piano. Jeez - if I had kept my mouth shut we would have had sex on the piano. No, fucked, we would have fucked on the piano.

Well, I would have made love. The thought is heavy and sad in my mind. He never made love to me, has he always fucked with him.

Grayson comes back and hands me an envelope.

'Stephen has a decent price. It is a classic car. You can ask him. He will take you home.'

He nods in the direction over my shoulder. I turn around and Stephen stands in the doorway, dressed in his suit, as crisp as ever.

'It's good, I can take myself home, thank you.'

I turn to stare at Grayson, and I see the barely contained fury in his eyes.

'Are you going to challenge me at every turn?'

'Why change a habit of a lifetime?' I give him a little apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

'Please, Naddalin, let Stephen take you home.'

'I'll get the car, Miss Black,' Stephen announces with authority. Grayson nods at him, and when I look around Stephen is gone.

I turn to face Grayson. We are four feet from each other. He takes a step forward, and instinctively I step back. He stops, and the anguish in his expression is palpable, his gray eyes burning.

'I don't want you to go,' he whispered, his voice full of lust.

'I cannot stay. I know what I want and you cannot give it to me, and I cannot give you what you need.'

He takes another step forward and I put my hands up.

'Don't do that, please.' I step back in front of him. There is no way I can tolerate his touch now, he will kill me. 'I can not do that.'

Grabbing my suitcase and backpack, I make my way to the foyer. He follows me, keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button and the doors open. I ride.

'Bye, Grayson,' I whisper.

'Naddalin, bye,' he said softly, and he looks completely, completely broken, a man in excruciating pain, reflecting what I feel inside. I look away from him before changing my mind and trying to comfort him.

The elevator doors close and it pulls me into the bowels of the basement and my hell.

Stephen holds the door open for me and I get into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact.

Embarrassment and shame come over me. I am a complete failure. I had hoped to drag my numerous Shadows into the light, but it turned out to be a task beyond my meager abilities. Desperately, I try to keep my emotions in the bank and at bay. As we make our way to 4th Avenue, I stare out the window, and the enormity of what I have done slowly overwhelms me. Damn - I left it. The only man I have ever loved. The only man I slept with.

I gasp and the dikes burst. Tears flow spontaneously and unwelcome down my cheeks, and I hastily wipe them off with my fingers, reaching for my sunglasses in my bag. As we stop at some traffic lights, Stephen hands me a linen handkerchief. He does not say anything or looks in my direction, and I take him with gratitude.

'Thank you,' I mumble, and this quiet little gesture of kindness is my downfall. I sit in the luxurious leather seats and cry.

The apartment is empty and unfamiliar. I have not lived here long enough to make me feel at home. I walk straight to my room, and there, hanging limply on the end of my bed, is an incredibly sad and deflated helicopter balloon. Fake and Gay, who

looks and feels exactly like me. I angrily grab her on my railing, slam the tie and hug her. Oh - what did I do?

I fall on my bed, my shoes and everything, and I scream. The pain is indescribable... physical, mental... metaphysical... it is everywhere, seeping into the bone marrow. Pain.

It is heartbreak - and I brought it on myself. Deep down, a mean and spontaneous thought comes from my inner goddess, her lip curled in a growl... the physical pain of the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation. I roll up, hopelessly grasping Stephen's flat film balloon and tissue, and yield to my misery.

Interval: 2 Broken Record

Yet there is nothing wrong with polygamy, the sad thing here is you must look that word up don't you? Yet everyone is a scarlet letter, yet being me I have been said to do adultery. Why is it okay in the catholic faith to think you would have to end your partner's life, when getting a divorce is a sin yet killing is not? And you think your right in your twisted faith of not being able to read to know yet think to believe like a simpleton, praying for forgiveness by something that was created for man, by man to make war, shaming, and shunning.

Part: 1

Haven- Call me slut remember I am nothing more than your imboldent characterizing a combination of incompetence, ignorance, stupidity, and inferiority.

I remember your mother and that is how you were made. It is like heresy, a. An opinion or a doctrine at variance with established religious beliefs, especially dissension from or denial of Roman Catholic dogma by a professed believer or baptized church member. A controversial or unorthodox opinion or doctrine, as in politics, philosophy, or science. It is like hierarchy, a system or organization in which people or groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority.

I never explained the death of my adopted sister 'The End of All Hope church,' that I went to for years deemed us as witchcraft because of me they drugged my adopted sister to the basement a letter on fire as a child as a young girl and now she wants the church that we once went to or so the legend goes. All because, I was going to lose my second virginity, do you want to? I remember saying that to the pastor.

I have been through the Amish shunning is the use of social exclusion as the method used to enforce Amish church rules. Contrary to widespread belief, Amish shunning does not end all social interaction, but it does involve rituals that remind the wayward of their sin and seek to bring them back into fellowship.

Amish members may no longer eat at the same table as you. This means that when you attend an Amish gathering like a wedding or funeral, you must sit apart from the Church members when food is served.

Members may not do business with you. This can be a real hardship if you buy from and sell to your Amish neighbors.

There have been a few lawsuits over the church denying the ex-member a right to make a living. Of course, lawsuits are forbidden by the Ordnung so this just shows that there is no repentance.

Members may not ride in your car. If you visit your family they are forbidden to ride with you, even though they are allowed to ride with their "English" neighbor.

Members cannot receive anything from you. Friends and family can help you by giving you money or things that you need. But they are forbidden to accept anything from you.

For example, if when visiting your Amish family, you want to serve a glass of water to your parents, you must leave it on the table for one of your younger siblings to give to your parents. Since your siblings are not yet members of the Amish church, they are not yet bound to the rules applying to shunning.

Scientology shunning, called "disconnection," forbids its members from interacting with a "suppressive" person. No calls, no letters, no contact.

When a Jehovah's Witness is "disfellowshipped"(shunned), all members including immediate family drop all contact. A disfellowshipped relative "should be

made to appreciate that his status has changed, that he is no longer welcome in the home nor is he a preferred companion."

In some cultures and religions violators of doctrine can be put to death.

Tame in comparison, Amish shunning is used as a tool to convince the wayward ex-member to come back into the fold.

-And-

My family was banned and not asked to come back, but we did anyway, and you can see what happened for yourself. I think one of the hardest things is getting older and seeing the childhood that you saw. Taking holy communion in a white dress now, now in a white wedding dresses, yet pregnant beforehand, with their small baby bump, now getting married off, with a life that was not held back in away way, by being the same type of animals, in a cult of a commonwealth, in a simple town, yet this is what is running in my head not yet blown out yet by the seaside by cop scenario, that was playing out by me in there flashlights being deliberately and violently killed in the massacre, lost in the remembrances of time, you look back on those days and say oh well.

This is how I died, the only thing I could do is take the AK and spray for fame, by dragging all of them like my teachers' teachers down to the basement of the church out by the mop of their hair Nitzy style at point-blank range and spray

their brains all over the brick walls in the darkness the only thing I could see was the flashing of end of my barrel, round after round, of not taking any more SHIT, I felt that was everybody's justice for being in the class I was made to be a simpleton wanting nothing more than to worship in faith.

Your time is limited, so do not think you have forever... living someone else's life when it is still going to be all the same, that is what my tombstone said, I have seen a century once in my life- yet stayed the age of 14 all those days after my own ending.

~Haven~

I would like to tell you about something that happened to me when I was a boy of 14 years old. In the beginning, I was a "pretty" skinny, average tall boy, small-boned, with completely feminine traits. For as long as I can remember, I used to love to play dress-up with dolls and dress up as girls. Since puberty, this one has taken on a whole new excitement.

It was at this time that an overly exciting event occurred. My parents and sisters were on their way to Queensland to attend a conference but I had to stay with my aunt to finish the exam in school. My aunt and two of my cousins were tending a small farm near a quiet farming village.

My Aunt Joan was a 35-year-old attractive girl who lived in Sydney. My cousins Abigail and Joline were extremely attractive, 17 and 14, respectively. They were all pretty and feminine in their outfits and grooming. The farm, about three hours from Sydney, ten minutes from the village, and one hour from town was isolated and the weather was so cold that few people visited.

My aunt was subconsciously jealous of being the only boy in our families, and that was the driving force of what was about to happen.

My family left early Monday morning and my aunt picked me up after school. Auntie had to make a quick trip to town to hand over some of the clothes she had changed and we stayed around the house. On her return, she decided to take some old cans of paint to the shed. I stumbled a little and one of my cans spilled over me.

My clothes were just painted but destroyed. I took a shower and went to the bedroom to find a lovely green dress on the bed. There was also a lace camisole and matching panties.

Called My aunt to ask where my clothes were and said that my bag must have left in my family's car by accident and that she also left a bag with my cousin's jeans at home too. "You will have to wear something for the next two weeks and that's all," said the aunt. I made some protests and went to my room.

While I knew I would have fun wearing beautiful clothes, I knew I was young I had to pretend I was not going to like it. A few minutes later, Abigail (whom I was quite close to) came over and said that even though she knew I did not want to dress up, that was the only thing to do, and she and Jailin would not laugh at me or anything else. Jaylynn came up at the time and promised not to laugh or tell anyone. She said I had to get dressed because there was no one else around anyway. They both promised again not to tell anyone and then saw me alone.

I could not believe what was happening, of course, I love to dress up beautifully and they would not even think of me, let alone laugh. I had a perfect excuse that was offered to me as I saw it.

I put on lace underpants and then put on the green dress. There was also a pair of white lace upper socks and a pair of black shoes with a buckle. I looked at myself in the mirror and after I missed the last hairstyles that looked so good. I was so thrilled and delighted that the dress had a full skirt and petticoat, which would cover the marks of my enthusiasm.

It was time to leave the room. My aunt and my cousins were busy in the kitchen preparing dinner and did not care much about me. My aunt told me that

made more sense. Abigail told me I looked fine and Jaylen agreed. Then they all followed what they were doing.

My aunt asked me to set the table. We had dinner and had a short chat about anything. After dinner, my aunt asked me to come so she could look at me. She told me I looked particularly good. She cut and combed my hair in a more feminine style.

With my new hairstyle, I looked very feminine and I could easily be Abigail's younger sister. On our way to bed, my aunt gave me a robe to wear and some cream to rub in the morning before I shower to tidy up any unwanted hair.

In the morning I put on the cream, took a shower, and put on the clothes I was wearing the day before. Abigail came to my room and helped me style my hair and put the least amount of natural color makeup on. Looking in the mirror, I could see this incredibly beautiful girl looking at me again and starting to feel overly excited again.

From my experience dressing up girls, I had a clever idea of how to act and I was adjusting quickly. I heard Aunt Joan call us for breakfast so I went, relaxing more than the day before and feeling very feminine.

My aunt told me that I looked incredibly beautiful and convincing when I was a girl. We decided to have a girl's name in case someone heard us. Abigail

suggested Julie and I agreed I liked it. We finished breakfast, and then my aunt put more clothes on for me so I could have a chance. She suggested we go for a walk.

I was not sure if I were ready to go out, but everyone convinced me I would be okay. I would not be remotely prominent anyway with everyone wearing the full skirt dresses that were fashionable at the time. It was wonderful to walk through the pastures with my dress skirt cleaning against me and the light breeze blowing in our skirts. A bigger wind blew over all our skirts, revealing our petticoats and panties. How exciting it was. We were all enjoying this beautiful day and being very feminine.

We walked along the creek farther than we thought. We were now at the next property. So shocked, we met another guy - a 15-year-old boy named Lance. He knew my cousins and my aunt, and I made him known as Julie. I was afraid that he would know I was a boy, but I was so excited that someone else might see me dressed.

To my surprise and pleasure, he kissed me as a girl and seemed extremely interested in me. We all sat on the bank of the river and talked. Lance had positioned himself on the bank below us where if we wanted him he could have a pleasant view under our skirts. We all enjoyed giving him what was occasional

yet intentional glimpses of our panties and even our skirts. Lance was overly excited even though he did not realize we noticed it.

We were enjoying teasing Lance but it was too late, so we said goodbye and promised to meet tomorrow. We walked up the bank and watched Lance until we went to the trees. Abigail made an excuse that she had forgotten something by the river, so she asked me to come back with her to get it.

We hid among the trees and saw that Lance was still at the river's edge. He looked around and thought he was alone. He took off his jeans and underwear and was enjoying himself. He was so excited, and Abigail and I were excited to watch it. Abigail slipped her hand under her skirt. I could not see much but she was enjoying herself and she was not even concerned about watching her. Abigail straightened herself and said we'd better go. I was so shocked.

We went home, had dinner, and went to bed. I took the opportunity to be alone in bed to relieve the stress built up from the fun of the day. The silk nightgown on my body is the trick.

In the morning I took a shower and put on a lace-padded bra and panties, a white petticoat, and a faded dress. The dress was soft and the petticoat was making the skirt fluffy while I was walking. Aunt Joan praised me for how I looked.

I got the idea that she was enjoying dressing and behaving like a girl. I was enjoying it too - for the first time I was feeling complete.

And Abigail, and she sat outside under the trees and talked about clothes, boys, and practice, and about seeing Lance pull himself out.

While I still considered myself a boy, the way I dressed and acted made it all seem so natural. Abigail told us how she was sitting in the front seat of the bus because she knew the boys behind her could see under the skirt of her jacket in the mirror. I enjoyed the idea of all the boys looking seriously at her. She also liked to bend a little more than she did, which bothers the boys.

My aunt and cousins decided to go to town, but despite the protests, I decided I was not ready yet to let others see me. After they left I went for a walk and ran towards Lance. At first, I was a little unsure, but after realizing he was convinced I was a girl I decided to have some fun.

It was still a bit windy, so my skirt was blown up to reveal my panties and panties. I could see that I had his attention, so I faked it. I sat on the bank and knew he could see my skirt. Then we went for a walk. He was holding my hand and helping me go down some rocks. After taking some advice from Abigail, I was able to make sure Lance could get a lot of good views under my skirt, and it was clear all of that had the desired effect. Lance was running - oddly enough, I did.

Over the next rock, my body gently slid down on Lance. He held me for a moment and then put my lips on his face and kissed him. He was very shy and surprised but enjoyed it. We sat on the lawn and kissed again. His shyness succumbed to his passion and awkwardly took his hand under my skirt and around my ass. I put his hand in the back of my panties and I was overly excited but I had to stop him before finding out. I grabbed his hand and said it was that time of the month. He nervously pulled away. So I reassured him that I could still kiss him and make him feel good. Twenty minutes passed and we were talking and cuddling. I had to go back until we fixed ourselves, kissed, and parted.

On the way back up the hill, I ran into Abigail in the bushes. You watched everything. I grabbed my hand and kissed it on our sapphire lips. We put our legs crossed on the floor and our hands touched under our skirts. Then I took off my underwear and put on my skirt and my skirt. How cute it felt like she was touching me. Everything was too much. We smoothed our skirts and came home to dinner with our secrets.

The next day we seemed to continue as if nothing had happened. I wore a soft white cotton blouse, a full navy blue skirt, and a white petticoat. I did my makeup and hair. I was training well with my hair and makeup and I was looking better. The makeup was very natural and was not too much for a girl my age.

At breakfast, my aunt announced that we would go to the village to buy some groceries. She added that she regrets the lack of clothing stores in what was just a village. I was happy about it but I never let it go. My aunt commented that I am happy to be wearing girls' clothes now and said that they are not so bad. I tried not to sound too enthusiastic.

I was not sure about going to town, but I knew I would not be able to get out of it this time. We all drove into town in pretty dresses and skirts. I was full of excitement and fear of someone else seeing me. My cousins told me I would not have any trouble passing by for a girl and not to worry.

In town, we walked from one store to another. I was introduced as Julie and no one seems to question my being a girl. How exciting it was. Most people thought I was the most attractive. What a pleasure. Abigail and I spent the morning flirting with the boys and when the same opportunity arose to lean over the counters causing our skirts to pull out and give the boys a good look at our panties. It is amazing how fun it is to tease men and boys.

Back at the farm, we had lunch and then went for a walk. It was a lovely sunny day walking through the meadows. There was a gentle breeze blowing with some storms that would blow up the inner skirts and jackets. The cool breeze was swirling under our skirts. I wondered if other people were enjoying everything as

much as I did. It was too late when we got back from our walk so we had dinner early and went to bed. The next morning was a bit cold so after putting on my panties and bra, I put on a warm full red shirt and skirt.

Then, I put on a creamy sweater and reached my waist. At breakfast that morning, I saw the others wearing the same clothes - I was glad I was learning to be a girl because I really enjoyed her. After breakfast, my aunt had to visit someone so she brought us to the beach to play. It was too cold to swim today, but we had a lot of fun playing in the jungle in the dunes. On the way, we grabbed each other's boobs and flipped each other's skirts a lot to spark some teenage boys at the beach.

How exciting it all was. We used to play in the rocks on the beach and have a wonderful time feeling feminine. We walked along hugging each other and wearing our skirts. it was a wonderful day. After a few hours of gaming, we saw a person, which was Lance.

Lance came in and we talked for a moment and flirted with him as he accidentally flipped our skirts over and made sure it was turned on. Abigail enjoyed the flirt and I was enjoying it too. Poor Lance had to put up with our harassment for the next hour. Then again he might have been enjoying it, too. I enjoyed being a girl.

What a vacation it turned out that this was and we still have three weeks to go ... yes I do. I have a boy and 3 girls. I started them to go commando with potty training.

The boy was never wearing underwear. Girls I only wore panties sometimes when I was taking them somewhere when they were little with a dress or skirt.

They would take them off as soon as I left them most of the time on my way home. For school, I always wore pants or shorts until they were older. I used to wear the old dresses on the girls most of the time at home to play them both. Now the two older girls are 13 and 15 years old and mostly wear jeans or shorts.

They both have one thing each because they want them to be the only underwear in the house. Choose them. They only wear them about 2 times. The boy is 11 years old and is without socks most of the time even in winter. The youngest girl is 10 years old. Girls are 100% without socks.

Just like my mom.

I would buy them socks and underwear if they wanted and wear them. They do not want anything. I remember when our daughter Jaylynn was 15 years old and she is free to choose whether and when she wants to wear underwear. I

have not worn panties for a couple of days after I gave birth to her and was completely panty-free until delivery. You always grew up with me to be a commando and accept that as a normal thing.

Yes, I will let my kids wear underwear if they want to. And they tell them it is perfectly okay to do so, and I will teach them proper hygiene to peek and pee so that their pants do not have any signs of slipping. And I would tell them not to be shy about telling their friends that they are without underwear. I suppose you could say we raised our two girls that way. We never sat them down and told them, "now girls, panties are bad" but since we do not wear them ourselves we just never went out of our way to buy any. Of course, grandparents would buy cute clothes for them, including panties with Strawberry Shortcake or Care Bears on them, which we told them they could wear if they wanted to. They all got worn, about once for the cuteness and novelty of it, then back in the drawer.

Yet as a mother, I also remember a young teen Jaylnn that was standing in a white dress next to her teen young wife also in the same matching dress.

Part: 2

I- Naddalin stare at her, repeat her words in my head, and I can barely believe what I just heard now seeing her in our world for the first time.

'How exactly do you plan to do that?' I am transformed. Seriously. In a century of your life, have you ever had a real job? But even though I am dead sad and not kidding at all, she turns her head back and laughs just as I was. I am mocked for doing justice.

She calms down enough to say, 'Do you reliably believe that no one will hire me?'

I could get a job if I wanted to, but, back home, how - and when could I - you work in a town that you do not think of yourself then they are, and in every way you can think of, children who work with nothing like you and their parent who became your boss now thinks you are a waste of life; So get a job - yes. That is why you are dead. And was long before now.

She shakes her head and laughs more. Forever, please. Don't you think I have been around long enough to improve some skills?

~*~

All this started to reply, and I want to make it clear that while wonderful watch painted, better than Picasso one hand while at the same time excel on Van Gogh in the hand like a machining- spluttering blood like paints in a crazed young woman's head, I see all the murdering... of freedom in life, and a world that was becoming less free every day.

Do not really think that it helped her to get the post Barista- desired It is in Starbucks in the sucking my thumb in the corner, and yet something about girls will never change, just like every girl has that boy who is her bitch, and she realized that I own that moment and she has it now... so- oh um!

However, before I said that, Naddalin was she stands beside me- Haven, and she moves with such speed and grace, all I can do is, 'Well, for someone who turns her back on her gifts, she is still moving so fast, for a girl who does not do that what I did, I do not want to see more of her past even if it appears in my painting with in this castle walls like a chapel.

As so-o as if feeling the same as familiar in being the one under given acupuncture, with a warm wonderful flowing and swimming is the case inside my skin is slipping in my arms and around my waist and glass from the chana closet to her chest in the feelings so strongly, and dodges carefully on contact skin of the skin, however, cannot help by feel rattled, I feel everything that Haven did in her death, remembered now for all like us here to keep even if dark to all that understand why we all get the movement she was fighting for.

-And-

'In addition, what about telepathy?' Ripping myself out of the moment.

I cannot even do that, Hum.

Thinking- your brain spends about 70% of its time recreating memories and creating scenarios for ideal moments. Therefore I am me, Nevaeh as Naddalin and Karly when need be.

Waiting - like drawing - is sometimes associated with depression - and it comes into the picture.

Outside the wind was tearing down trees, ravaging our castle. The storm was piling up, so dark that you could not see much after the front porch. However, my eyes strained, looking for the source of the sounds that attacked my ear. Loud laughs and cries pierced the night, causing chills on my skin.

The time you spend waiting for something that may never happen is mentally distressing.

The best feeling in the world is knowing that you mean something to someone. This can add years to your life. Sometimes good people make bad choices. This does not mean that they are evil, it means that they are human.

However, we were not human that were always under the control of someone using them like a robot. Then he started talking- 'Are you planning to give that up too - for your home?'

Then my world became dark, and they closed the barrier between my room and their world.

I had no idea how long it had passed it could have been minutes or hours. I felt like forever I did not know any sound, no vision.

All I could do was wait and then eventually someone came. At first, all I could see was a light flash of light when the barrier was opened.

Then silent voices and steps. What seemed like scraping as my room door was forced open.

I- Haven looked up and into the eyes of a woman I have never seen before. Yet I know where I was by the story I read as a child and that is why I am here. Therefore, after getting over it by its juxtaposition, I can barely take out the words.

'I have no plans to give up on anything that brings me closer to you,' she says, staring at me, steadfast and steadfast.

My mind drifts back in time in the mind of now being Nevaeh... remembering going to the Victoria Falls on the border of Zimbabwe and Zambia, I recall taking the Safari Train, Safari Train that runs purely in Zimbabwe.

All of this is like my time machine and my teachers make \$300,000 in five years, and I am just supposed to be held back, as they drop them. Pants to a party of pissing on me without the courtesy of calling, it down poring raining down on me this is the time machine that takes me back and makes me forget? That was good

and dwell on the pain of the past, which is replacing all, the better moments but the worst moments in time.

'As for the rest of that moment,' she Nevaeh shrugs, glancing around the large space before she finds me again.

And tell me, what matters most, never - never? The size of my home or the size of my heart?

I bite my lips and avoid my gaze, the fact of her words makes me feel upset and ashamed - like sex for the first time - when she is 13, and I can now agree.

I swallow hard, focus on whatever else, rethink my life and all my memories come to life.

It is not that I care about her past, I mean, if I want to have this stuff, I will wipe it myself. Usually, an immediate change in mood from happiness to sadness indicates that you are missing someone, I noticed it ...

Yet again although it is not important - there are such - just - missed moments in time, if I were to honestly lose it, I must admit that they were part of the initial attraction - adding to her elegant, shiny, mysterious personality, which instantly attracted me. Then when I finally stand before her again, standing before me, stripped of all the usual dazzle and flash, sharpening her to the essence of who

she is, I realize that she is still the same, the warm and wonderful girl that she has been.

Which proves her point more. None of those other things matter. None of that has anything to do with her spirit whatsoever.

I smile, I suddenly remember the only place we could be together safe and protected from harm.

I sought to reach her gloved hand while holding it in mine, saying, 'Come on, I want to show you something,' and pulled it out.

At first, she worried that she would refuse to visit a place that not only requires a certain amount of magic to enter, but that is nothing but magic once you arrive.

Previously, after landing in this vast, sweet-smelling field, she wiped the back of her jeans and offered her hand, staring everywhere as she says, 'Wow, I don't think I've ever managed to make the gate like that so quickly.'

'Please, you who taught me.' I smile, staring at a meadow of pulsating flowers and shivering trees, indicating how everything here is reduced to the purest form of beauty and energy.

I tilt my head back, closing my eyes to the warm, hazy glow you make with me in the shimmering mist of the day.

I remember the last time I was here, how I danced with Naddalin appearing in the same field, delaying the moment I had to leave.

~ * ~

'So, are you okay to be here?' I ask, not sure how widespread the ban on magic is. I am not crazy? ' I want to make sure it is comfortable!

Then she shook her head and took my hand.

'I've never tired of seeing this world in its colors and unbelievable creatures.'

It is a display of beauty and potential in its pure form. We make our way through pastures, supported by the grass just below our feet while our fingers graze on the tops of flowers. The golden wilderness that bends and sways beside us.

Knowing anything is possible in this wonderful place, anything at all, including us.

'I missed ... everything ...'

she said, staring everywhere ... I remember,

`` No the last few weeks without it, even so, it looks like it has been a long time since the last time we were here - just like that.'

I said, ' It felt weird to come without you, ' leading her towards a beautiful, well-balanced bathroom next to the shaded table. In blue and green.

Even though I have fully discovered another side, I cannot wait to show you. Only later - not now. I pushed the guns America pink fabric aside and fell on the soft white pillows, smiling as Nadalin fell right next to me, and we were lying side by side. Side by side, we gaze at the ornately carved coconut beams.

Head together The soles of our feet are just a few inches shy - the result of a growth spurt fueled by elixirs.

'What is the...?'

Turns over on her side ...

Then I approach the curtains with my mind to me and her side. We are keen to exclude all those surroundings from her and I, so we can enjoy our own space.

I saw one on the cover of a travel magazine featuring some exotic resorts, and I loved it so much that I thought I would show it. You know, so we can hang around.

I block my eyesight, my heart rate, my face flushed, and I know that I am the most pitiful seducer I have met in a hundred years.

However, she was just laughing, and she pulled me so close that we almost touched her.

Separated by only a thin blanket of sparkling energy, a pulsating screen hovers between us - allowing us to get close without harming each other.

I close my eyes, succumbing to the wave of warmth and tingling as our bodies gather. Two hearts pumping in perfect harmony, reaching, and retreating, widening, and retreating, the rhythm is perfectly synchronized as if it were beating as one.

Everything about it feels so good and so natural so I am getting closer. My face nests in the hollow where her shoulder meets her neck, longing to savor her sweet skin and inhale her warm aromatic scent.

A low moan escapes from the depths of her throat as I close my eyes and press her hips, tilting my tongue toward her skin, only to make her spring out of my reach so quickly that I meet the touch of the pillow.

She pushed upright, seeing her move so fast that it turned blurry. He only stops when she is safely hiding on the other side of the curtain, her eyes are on fire, her body is trembling, and I beg her to tell me what happened.

I approached her, wanting to help.

But again, as soon as I get close to her, she moves, and yet, once again holding her hand, the note wakes me away.

She says, 'Don't touch me.' Please, stay where you are. Do not get close.

'But why?'

'Why is a question.'

My voice is hoarse, uneven, my hands are trembling at my side as if I can feel my old ways and my old life - as it was when I got older - I am no longer a little girl.

Did you do something wrong?

I thought well - given that we are here - and since nothing bad could happen - I thought it would be okay - if we might try - to relive reconciliation.

'Never - it's not like that - she -' she shakes her head, her eyes are darker than I have ever seen - for being sky blue.

So the iris is very dark, indistinguishable from the pupils, and blends inward. 'And who said nothing bad could happen here?' Her tone is extremely irritable, the look is so harsh, and she has come an exceptionally long way from her usual state of impeccable calm.

I swallow so hard and stare at the floor, feeling stupid with my girlfriend, I risked her life - if they were if they ... - and the silliness to think too miserable for me to do - they know -and that I was guessing - I just assumed...'.

I am sorry.'

My voice is fading, and I know very well what happens when one assumes. I do not know what to say.' Not only are you making me and you lately, but in this case, you may end up dying one last time with no more lives given to you.

I guess - I did not think about it very well and then shook my head, realizing that it was inadequate given the life and death circumstances that we are in.

I mean, if we are not safe here, where? I pull my shoulder in, and wrap my arms around my waist, trying to make myself smaller, so I will fade out of her sight.

However, I cannot help but wonder specifically what kind of sad thing can happen in a place where magic comes so easily, and wounds heal instantly.

Looked at Naddalin too, responding to an idea that spins in my head when she says, 'school has the possibility of everything. So far, we saw only light, but who will say that there is no dark? Besides, this is not what we believe at all.

Looked at her, I remember when I first met Javion Wren and how they said something similar. I watch her showing a beautifully carved wooden bench, then gestures for me to sit down. 'Come,' she nodded, she urged me as I took a seat at the far end, and she did not want to get too close. And risk releasing it again.

There is something you need to see - something you need to understand. So please just close your eyes and clear your mind of any random thoughts and clutter

as much as possible. Keep yourself open and receptive to any insights I send. Can you do that? '

Nodded my head ... closed my eyes ...

I do my best to have my mind ideas swept like - what goes in my mind, and I thought more reflection? Is she angry at me - or just angry?

Without a doubt, she angry me - I know it!

How can I be so stupid? But how crazy is she? Can she change her mind and start over? My usual paranoid playlist is set to repeat.

Always But even after wiping it and waiting for a reasonable amount of time, all I got until now is a heavy vacuum of black steel thick.

'I do not understand it, ' I said, and I opened my eyes and peered out.

However, they are shaking her head only, her eyes closed tightly, and eyebrows merged into focus, a focus bares all its strength.

Says: 'Hear' at once.

'And look deep inside.'

Just close your eyes and get it.'

I took a deep breath and tried again, but even so, all I get is an alarming silence and a feeling of black emptiness.

I am sorry, me. Realized, I do not want to bother her but I am sure I am missing the point.

'I don't get much of anything other than silence and darkness.' She whispers 'sincerely,' unperturbed by you. Lamy. 'Now please, hold my hand and go deeper, go beyond the surface with all of your senses, then tell me what you see.'

I take a deep breath and do what she tells me to do, reach out to hers, and go past the solid, dark wall.

...But all I get is the same.

Hanging - I plunged.

Um while waiting - I had a black hole, its limbs rolling, unable to stop or slow down. Freefall in the dark, my terrible voice screams out in one voice.

And just as I am sure the fall is endless, so it stops. Yelp. the fall. everything.

Everything ... he leaves me hanging there, then let loose, and suspended. Completely alone in a secluded place, with no beginning or end.

Lost in the dark and gloomy abyss with no trace of light coming. Desolate in the infinite void, a lost and lonely world of eternal midnight. The terrifying understanding slowly seemed to me - this is where I live now.

Hell without escape ...!

-Then-

I try to run, scream, and cry for help - but it is no use.

I am frozen, paralyzed, unable to speak completely on my own about all the infinities.

Frankly out of everything I know and I like to cut out from everything that exists.

Knowing that I have no choice but to give up because my mind is empty and my body is limp.

There is no point in fighting when no one can save me.

Kept that way, lonely, eternal, mysterious consciousness creeping into me, pulling from a place out of reach'-to-hanging-out - I took that hell into Nadalin's arms, relieved to see her beautiful, anxious face hovering over me.

"I'm so sorry - I thought I lost you - I thought you'd never come back!" She screamed, grabbed me tight, like a sigh in my ear.

I cling to her, my body trembling, her art races, her clothes drenched in sweat. I have never felt so isolated before - even disconnected - from everything. From every living thing. I hugged her tightly, unwilling to let go of her, my mind reached out to her, and he asked me why she chose to put me into it.

She turns away, puts my face in her hands as her eyes search for mine. 'I am sorry. I was not trying to punish you or hurt you in any way. I just wanted to show you something, something that you needed to experience first-hand to understand.

I nodded, I cannot trust my voice. I was still shaken by the horrific experience so much that it felt like my soul died.

'My Lord!' Her eyes widened. 'This is! This is exactly what it is. The soul is no longer there!

I do not understand, says, a hoarse, shaky voice. 'What is this terrible place?'

I looked away, her fingers squeezing my fingers when she said, 'The future, the eternal abyss that I thought was only for me - which I wish was only for me...' She closes her eyes and shakes her head. But now I know better. Now I know that if you were not careful, you would go there too.

I looked at her, began to speak, but she cut me off before I could even reach for the words. 'In the past few days I've been getting these flashy glimpses, really different moments from the past - far and near.' She looks at me, looking carefully at me.

'But the moment we came here-' her signals were around. It started flowing again, slowly at first until everything became known, including the moments when I was under Magdalene's control.

I also felt relieved of my death. Those short moments after I pierced the circuit before the antidote drunk me, you know, I was dying. I watched my whole life flash before me, hundreds of years of vanity, narcissism, selfishness, and unchecked greed.

Like an endless reel of all my actions, every mistake I made was accompanied by the effect it had - the mental and physical impact of my mistreatment of others.

And while there is some decent work here and there, the majority, well, have reached centuries of my focus on nothing but my goodness, with little thought given to anything or anyone else. Focus only on the physical world at the expense of the spiritual. Not leaving me any doubt that I was right the whole time, my karma is responsible for what we are going through now.

She shakes her head and meets my gaze with such unshakable sincerity and I want to reach out to her, hold her and tell her everything will be fine. Instead, I stayed put, sensing that there was more and it was about to get worse.

Then, now that I am dead, instead of coming here - her voice cuts out but she forces herself to keep going. I went to the exact opposite place.

A very dark and cold place like home that I wanted it to be or thought it could be. Suffering from the same thing you just did. Solitary, suspended, lonely to stay that way forever. You look at me and want to understand. It was just how it felt. It was as if I was a loner without a soul and unconnected to anything or anyone else.

Staring in her eyes, an ominous shiver covered my skin, I had never seen her so tired, so exhausted, so sad before.

'And now I understand the same thing that escaped from me all these years -
' I pull my knee to my chest, protecting myself from everything that comes next.

'Only our physical bodies are immortal. Our souls certainly are not.

I avoid my sight, unable to look at, unable to breathe.

'The future she faces. What I gave you, God forbid, anything should happen,
that is it.

My fingers instinctively fly down my throat, and I remember what Naddalin had to say about the piercing chakras, my lack of discrimination and vulnerability, and wondering if there was some way to protect it. 'But how can you be sure?' I look at her as if she were stuck in a dream, a terrifying and inevitable nightmare.

I mean, there is a good chance you were wrong because it happened too quickly. So this was only a temporary condition. You know, just as I brought you back to life very quickly, you do not have time to make the journey here.

She shakes her head, and her looks meet mine when she says, 'Tell me, whatever did you see when she died? How did you spend those few moments between the time your soul left your body and brought you back to life?

I swallowed hard and looked away, staring at the trees, the flowers, the clear stream gushing nearby, and I remember that day finding myself in the same field.

So, given its strong scent, its shimmering mist, and the all-around feeling of unconditional love, I felt tempted to stay forever, never wanting to leave.

The reason you do not see the abyss is that you are still human. She died a fatal death. However, the moment you drank the elixir and gave you an unlimited life, everything changed. Instead of eternity at school or the place behind a bridge - Shadow worlds become your destiny.

She shakes her head and looks away, overwhelmed with her world of regret and I am afraid not to get to her again. But just as quickly as her eyes meet when she says, 'We can never live in the plane of Earth, you and I are together. But if something happens, if one of us dies - she shakes her head.' The abyss is where we are going, and we will never see each other once. Others. '

I began to speak, desperate to refute it, tell her that this is wrong, but I cannot. No use. All I must do is look into her eyes to see the truth.

-And-

As much as I believe in the magic of the powerful evangelization of the place - just look at the way my memory preached - 'She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

I cannot bear to surrender, no matter how safe my desire seems to you. It is a significant risk. Besides, we do not have immunity, it will be different here than what is on the ground. It is a gamble that I cannot bear. Not when I need to do everything I can to keep you.

And safe 'Keep me harmless?' I yawn hard. You who need to save! It is my fault everything happened in the first place! If I do not - 'Always, please,' she says in a raspy voice, 'And you want to listen.

Kept that way, lonely, eternal, mysterious consciousness creeping into me, pulling from a place out of reach'-to-hanging-out - I took that hell into Nadalin's arms, relieved to see her beautiful, anxious face hovering over me.

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'But the moment we came here-' her signals were around. It started flowing again, slowly at first until everything became known, including the moments when I was under Magdalene's control.

I also felt relieved of my death. Those short moments after I pierced the circuit before the antidote drunk me, you know, I was dying. I watched my whole life flash before me, hundreds of years of vanity, narcissism, selfishness, and unchecked greed.

Like an endless reel of all my actions, every mistake I made was accompanied by the effect it had - the mental and physical impact of my mistreatment of others.

And while there is some decent work here and there, the majority, well, have reached centuries of my focus on nothing but my goodness, with little thought given to anything or anyone else. Focus only on the physical world at the expense of the spiritual. Not leaving me any doubt that I was right the whole time, my karma is responsible for what we are going through now.

She shakes her head and meets my gaze with such unshakable sincerity and I want to reach out to her, hold her and tell her everything will be fine. Instead, I stayed put, sensing that there was more and it was about to get worse.

Then, now that I am dead, instead of coming here - her voice cuts out but she forces herself to keep going. I went to the exact opposite place.

A very dark and cold place like home that I wanted it to be or thought it could be. Suffering from the same thing you just did. Solitary, suspended, lonely to stay that way forever. You look at me and want to understand. It was just how it felt. It was as if I was a loner without a soul and unconnected to anything or anyone else.

Staring in her eyes, an ominous shiver covered my skin, I had never seen her so tired, so exhausted, so sad before.

'And now I understand the same thing that escaped from me all these years -
' I pull my knee to my chest, protecting myself from everything that comes next.

'Only our physical bodies are immortal. Our souls certainly are not.

I avoid my sight, unable to look at, unable to breathe.

' The future she faces. What I gave you, God forbid, anything should happen,
that is it.

My fingers instinctively fly down my throat, and I remember what Naddalin had to say about the piercing chakras, my lack of discrimination and vulnerability, and wondering if there was some way to protect it. 'But how can you be sure?' I look at her as if she were stuck in a dream, a terrifying and inevitable nightmare.

I mean, there is a good chance you were wrong because it happened too quickly. So this was only a temporary condition. You know, just as I brought you back to life very quickly, you do not have time to make the journey here.

She shakes her head, and her looks meet mine when she says, 'Tell me, whatever did you see when she died? How did you spend those few moments between the time your soul left your body and brought you back to life?

I swallowed hard and looked away, staring at the trees, the flowers, the clear stream gushing nearby, and I remember that day finding myself in the same field.

So, given its strong scent, its shimmering mist, and the all-around feeling of unconditional love, I felt tempted to stay forever, never wanting to leave.

The reason you do not see the abyss is that you are still human. She died a fatal death. However, the moment you drank the elixir and gave you an unlimited life, everything changed. Instead of eternity at school or the place behind a bridge - Shadow worlds becomes your destiny.

She shakes her head and looks away, overwhelmed with her world of regret and I am afraid not to get to her again. But just as quickly as her eyes meet when she says, 'We can never live in the plane of Earth, you and I are together. But if something happens, if one of us dies - she shakes her head.' The abyss is where we are going, and we will never see each other once. Others.'

I began to speak, desperate to refute it, tell her that this is wrong, but I cannot. No use. All I must do is look into her eyes to see the truth.

-And-

As much as I believe in the magic of the powerful evangelization of the place - just look at the way my memory preached - 'She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

I cannot bear to surrender, no matter how safe my desire seems to you. It is a significant risk. Besides, we do not have immunity, it will be different here than what is on the ground. It is a gamble that I cannot bear. Not when I need to do everything I can to keep you.

Safe, 'Keep me harmless?' I yawn hard. You who need to save! It is my fault everything happened in the first place! If I do not- 'Always, please,' she says in a raspy voice, 'And you want to listen.

You cannot blame. When I think about the way I lived - the things I did - 'it shakes Her heart. I do not deserve something better, and if there is any question about blaming my karma, well, it ends here.

I have spent the greater part of a hundred years dedicating myself to physical pleasure and spiritual neglect - and this is the result - the wake-up call, and inappropriately, I have dragged you.

So make no mistake, what concerns me is only you and you. You are my only priority. My life matters only because I stay well long enough to protect you from Naddalin and anyone else who might harm her. And that means we can never be together. never. It is a risk we cannot take.

I turned towards the stream, thousands of thoughts poking my mind. On top of that, even though I heard everything she just said, even though I have groomed the throttle for myself, I still have not changed who I am right now.

'And the other orphans?'

I whispered, and I remember getting back seven, including two porters, at one point. What happened to them? Do you know if they have turned into villains like Lily and Haven?

Nadine shrugs get up from the bench and walks in front of me. I always assumed that they were old and weak to the point that they did not pose a threat.

This is what happens in the first hundred years - your life - some are slower than the rest. The only way to reverse the process is to drink the tonic again if you like and finish it.

Haven collected it while we were dating and sent it to Nadine who eventually learned how to make it and then passed it onto the next one. Then she shook her head more.

This is where Haven is now, 'I complain, and I get over it with regret when I realize the truth. No matter how evil she is, she does not deserve it. Nobody does. I sent it here - and it is now - 'I shook my head, unable to finish.

'You know them?' Turned her on, surprised.

I squeeze my lips together, knowing that I will have to tell her the rest of the story, the parts I wish I had given up.

'It wasn't you who did it, it was me.'

The void fills beside me, sitting close there is only a sliver of energy beating between us.

'The moment she made her immortal, she determined her destiny.'

I was not sure whether she wanted it or not, yet it was the best I thought of it and my intention.

'Just like I did for you.'

I swallow hard, reassured of her warmth along with her desire to reassure me that I am not responsible for sending my first enemy of all my life straight to that hell.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispered with a look full of regret.

I am sorry I made you complicated on any of this. I should have left you alone - I should have walked a long time ago. You would be better off if you had never met me-'

He shook my head, unwilling to even visit this place, it is too late to look back or second guess. 'But if we are meant to be together - that may be our destiny.'

Knowing that she remained unconvinced, the second read her face.

Or you forced something that was never supposed to be. ' She frowns and looks down. 'Have you ever thought of that?'

Look away, bearing in mind the surrounding beauty, knowing words alone can never change any of them, only action can help; And luckily for us, I just know where to start.

I stand, pulling it to my side and I say, 'Come on. We do not need Naddalin - we do not need anyone - I just know the place! 'We head into the countless learning rooms ...

just stopping shy of its steep marble steps as I look at it, wondering (eager!) That she can see what I see - the ever-changing facade required to enter.

She says in a dreaded voice as we watch the group. Roundabout to the holiest and most beautiful place on earth: 'I really found it.' The

Great Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal transformed into the Parthenon, which transforms into the Temple of the Lotus, which becomes and so on. Our mutual recognition of its beauty and wonder allows us to enter the great marble hall lining it with Elaborately carved pillars from ancient Greek times. Things I never thought of living in a small town were the world to me, but more to them. Naddalin stares around, facing a mask of sheer astonishment as she takes it all in. 'I have not gone here since then. Now - I crave her while holding my breath, to know the details of the last time she was here.

Since I came to find you. 'diverting I am not sure what that means.

Sometimes - she was looking at me. I was lucky enough to have just spoken to you. And I ended up in the same place just in time. Although often I had to wait a few years before it was okay to meet.

'Did you mean you were spying on me?' I miss, hoping it is not as creepy as it sounds. 'when I was a kid?'

She wiggles, avoiding her gaze when she says, 'No, do not spy, never. Excuse me. What do you take from me? ' She laughs and shakes her head. It was like saving tabs.

Wait patiently until the right time. However, the last few times that I could not find you, no matter how hard I tried - and believe me, I tried to live like a wanderer, wandering around, sure I lost you forever - I decided to come here. I ran into some friends who showed me the way.

Javion Wren. I nodded, I do not hear or see the answer in her head, but somehow it was true. Overcome the immediate impulse of guilt for failing to even think of them yet. And I do not even wonder how they might be, and where they might be, until a second ago.

'You know them?' Turned her on, surprised.

I squeeze my lips together, knowing that I will have to tell her the rest of the story, the parts I wish I had given up.

'They led me here too-' I pause for a while, take a deep breath, and look away, preferring to take the room over to meet her sexy gaze. They were in Ava - or at least it was Ryan. Javion was outside-' I shook my head and started over.' Cher was trying to help you.'

Then when- I closed my eyes and sighed, and I decided to just show her instead. everything. Entire. Including the parts, I was ashamed to describe in words. Expect the events of that day so that the secrets between us will disappear. Let her know how hard they fought to save her, while I was so stubborn, and refused to listen.

But instead of getting upset as I feared, she puts her hands on my shoulder and stares at me with forgiveness as she thinks, what happened is done. We must move forward, there is no room for retreat.

I swallow hard and catch her gaze, knowing she is right. Time to start, but where do we start?

'It would be better if we separated.' Her gestures, her words were a surprise to my ears, and I am about to speak when she adds, 'Think about it at all. You are trying to find something to reverse the effects of the elixir that I have drunk, while I am trying to save you from Shadow worlds, not the same.'

I sighed, disappointed but must agree. I think I will see you again at home afterward. My house if that is okay? I put my hands on her and squeeze her, hesitating to visit her frustratingly barren room and unsure of where to stand on the entire curse of karma now that her memory has returned.

As soon as I nodded and closed her eyes, it disappeared.

So, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as well, thinking: I need help. I made a terrible mistake and I do not know what to do. I either need to find an antidote - something that will reverse the effects of what Naddalin did - Or find a way to reach it, and persuade her to cooperate with me - but only in a way that she will not need - um - seriously bargaining for myself in a way that I am not comfortable with ... if you know what I mean...

Focus on my intention, and repeat the words over and over. It grants access to Akashic Records, the perpetual record For everything that has been done, is done, or will be done at all. I pray to God not to close again like the last time I was here.

But by the time I hear that familiar noise, instead of the usual long hallway leading to a mysterious room, I find myself slapped in the middle of a cinema hall, its lobby is empty, and the snack bar is deserted, with no clue what to do until it opens a bunch of double doors. In front of me.

I step into a dark theater with sticky floors, worn seats, and the scent of buttery popcorn in the air. By pressing the aisle and choosing the best seat in the

house, the seat halfway down and the dead center, I push my feet onto the chair right in front of me as the lights turn off and a large tub of popcorn pops up in my lap. Watch the red curtains recede as the large crystal screen begins to flicker and glow in an abundance of images racing fast past the past.

But instead of the solution I was hoping for, all I get is a series of clips from movies that I have already seen. This resulted in a homemade montage of my family's funniest moments, scrolling straight from my old life in Oregon and revealing an audio track that only Riley could have made.

Part 2:

Watch a clip of Riley and me, we are both banging on a homemade stage in our lair, dancing and lip-synching to an audience consisting of our fathers and our dog. Soon followed by a picture of Buttercup, our sweet yellow lab. Her tongue was straining towards her nose, licking like crazy, trying to reach for a piece of peanut butter, Riley had dabbled there.

And while this was not what I had hoped for, I know it matters at all. Riley promised that she would find a way to connect with me, and she assured me that just because I could not see her anymore does not mean she was still around.

So, I push my mission aside and sink into my seat. Knowing that she is sitting next to me, silent and invisible. Wanting to share the moment, two sisters share a home movie version of what it was before.

By the time I get back to my room, Naddalin has been waiting, sitting on the edge of my bed, cradling a small satin bag in her gloved palm.

~ * ~

'How long have you gone?' I ask, I go down beside her as I go darker in my bed clock and do my math.

She reminds me of saying, 'There is no time at school.' 'But on the ground plane, I say you left for a while. Did you learn anything?'

Think of the home movies I watched, Riley's version of 'The Family's Funniest Videos', and then shake my head and shrug my shoulder. Nothing helpful. You?'

She smiles, and she hands over the silk bag and she says, 'Open and see.'

I pull the strap, insert a finger inside, and retrieve a black silk wire holding a group of colored crystals that have been tied together by thin golden ribbons. I watch them capture and reflect the light as I hang in front of me, Believing that they are beautiful if not a little strange.

She says, 'It's magic,' she watches me carefully as I take the individual stones, each bearing a different shape, size, and color.

They have been worn over the ages and are said to possess magical properties to evangelize, protect, thrive, and balance. Even though the person, who

is only being created for you, is heavy on the element of protection because that is what you need.

Look at it, I wonder how they could fool around. Then I remember the crystals I used to make the antidote that saved her, and how he would have worked - if Naddalin had not fooled me To add my blood to the mix.

It is unique, assembled, and crafted with your journey in mind. No one else like him, nowhere else. I know it does not solve our problem, but at least it will hurt.

Darker in a pack of rocks, not sure what I will say it is about to slip it off an over my head and try it, when she smiles and says, 'Let me...' I gathered my long hair and wrapped it over my shoulder as she stretched out behind me and secured the little golden clip, before tucking it under my tee where no one could see it.

'Is it a secret?' I ask, expecting the crystals to feel cold and hard against my skin and astonished to find them quite warm and comforting instead.

~*~

She brushes my hair back over my shoulder, letting it fall just shy of my waist. 'No, it is not a secret. Though you should not flaunt it either. I have no idea just how far Naddalin's advanced, so it is better not to draw her attention to it.'

'Her knows about the chakras,' I say, seeing the surprise in her gaze and choosing to omit the fact that she is responsible for that. Having unwittingly revealed all kinds of secrets while under Naddalin's spell. She feels bad enough already, so there is no reason to make it any worse.

I tap my fingers against the amulet beneath my shirt, surprised by how solid it feels from the outside, compared to the inside, the part that rests on my skin. 'But what about you? Don't you need protection too?' Watching as she unearths a similar amulet from under her long-sleeved tee, smiling as she dangles it before me. 'How come yours looks so different?' I ask, squinting at the cluster of sparkling stones.

'I told you, no two are alike. Just like no two people are alike. I have my own issues to overcome.'

'You have issues?' I laugh, though seriously wondering what they could be, she is good at everything she does.

-And-

I mean everything.

She shakes her head and laughs, a wonderful sound I do not get to hear enough anymore. 'Believe me, I've got my share,' she says, laughing again.

'And you're sure these will keep us safe?' I press it against my chest, noticing how it feels like a part of me now.

'That's the plan.' She shrugs, getting up from the bed and heading for the door as she adds, 'But, Ever, please do us both a favor and try not to put it to the test, okay?'

'What about Naddalin?'

I ask, taking in her long, lean form as she rests against the jamb. 'Don't you think we should produce a plan? Find a way to get her to give us what we need and be done with all the?'

Naddalin looks at me, gaze narrowed on mine. 'There's no plan, NEVER-Ever. Engaging with Naddalin is exactly what she wants. We are better off finding a solution on our own, without relying on her.'

'But how? Everything we have tried so far has been a total bust.'

-And-

I shake my head. 'And why should we run ourselves ragged, searching for answers, when Naddalin's already admitted to having the remedy? She said all I must do is pay the right price and he will hand it over-how hard can that be?'

'And you're willing to pay her price?' Naddalin asps, voice steady and deep as her dark eyes sweep mine.

I avert my gaze, cheeks hating to a thousand degrees. 'Of course not! Or at least not the price that you think!' I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms

around them. 'It's just-' I shake my head, frustrated at having to plead my case. 'It's just that-'

'She wants to divide us, make us question each other, break us apart. She also wants us to go after her and start the war.

'NEVER- Ever, this is exactly what Naddalin wants.' Her jaw tightens, her features harden, before meeting my gaze and softening again.

Then while I promise to do everything in my power to protect you, you must help me- and her too. You've no motive to trust her, she will lie, operate, and make no mistake, it is an extremely dangerous game that she plays.

You should promise you will stay away from her, ignore all her taunts, and will not rise to her bait. I will find a solution. Figure something out. Just please, look to me for the answers, not Naddalin, okay?'

I switch my gaze back to her, an idea beginning to form one that might work. I press my lips together and look away, wondering why I should promise any of that when the cure is right there for the taking. Besides, I am the one who caused the situation. I am the one who got us into the mess. So, I should be the one to get us both out. 'So, we're clear about Naddalin?' She tilts her head and lifts her brow, unwilling to leave until I consent.

I nod, just barely, but still enough to convince her to head down the stairs so fast I cannot distinguish her form. The only hint of her having been here are the stones against my chest and the single red tulip she left on the bed.

Thinking in my head, my prophecies have happened- the country with the flag with the star, remember that, launched rockets of war for our homeland in the USA, makes me glad to be where I am at, and remember the one that has fought and died for us, like Kristen! Now she is out there fighting with them the man and strong woman, yet once more in a new life, as one of us... the USA, it turns on the rest of the world, and they are turning on us. I foresee a day when like all just become nothing but impressions of just that... imitations!

'NEVER- Ever?'

Since as nice as it is lying beside Naddalin, the beat of our hearts connecting as one, eventually, it is just not enough. It will never- EVER- NEVER- EVER be enough. I want a normal relationship with my immortal boyfriend- NOT A GIRL! As you could think she is missing something is that I need and want- is she not? One with no walls.

Oh, yes boy- and I will stop at nothing to get it... One where I can genuinely enjoy the feel of skin as opposed to the way I remember it in my head.

(3 hours later, after sleeping in the same bed in the same room, drooling on one another as we sleep, dur-ta-dur- obviously.)

'Did you eat yet?'

She places her hand on my shoulder as she peers at the screen- I was working on my next part of my life's story- to add to the book- in my own words, hoping my words would stand the test of time like the girls before me, I find my story lackluster and boarding at times- yet it is the story of my life- like theirs.

-And-

Then since- I did not prepare, did not guard myself against her touch, that is all it takes to see her version of the infamous girls stand before me, I was part of this all, which, unfortunately, is not so different from Milley's version-the two of them acting all happy and giddy, smiling at each other with an abundance of hope, yet still on the inside nothing has changed.

Then even though she seems happy, and no doubt deserves to be happy especially after all that I have put her through, I still comfort myself with the vision I had a few months back- the one where she ends up with some cute boy she used to know- from back home when she goes back in time to relive- days gone by- like me too, always looking for more in the past than in the here and now- why?

(THE QUESTION IS WHY?)

And now I am right back where I started. Sober and miserable. I guess by now I should know enough about the loss to realizing that you never really stop

missing someone-you just learn to live around the huge gaping hole of their absence. Just like Our past may shape us, but it does not define who we become if only that was tried for us. The only thing a person can ever really do is keep moving forward. Take that big leap forward without hesitation, without once looking back. Simply forget the past and forge toward the future.

I am egotistic, impatient, and a little unconfident. I make mistakes, I am out of control, and at times hard to grip.

Nevertheless, if you cannot grip me at my nastiest, then you do not earn me at my finest- wondering if I should say or do something to temper her excitement since it is not like the little flirtation is going anywhere. Nonetheless, knowing I have already taken too big of a risk by outing myself to Milley, I do not say a word. I cannot afford to tip her off too.

I swivel around in my chair, releasing myself from her grip.

Wanting to avoid seeing anything more than I already have, waiting for her energy stream to fade.

'Naddalin made me dinner,' I say, voice steady and low even though it is not exactly true. Unless you count the solution, I drank.

Sher looks at me, gaze suddenly troubled as it narrows on mine. 'Naddalin?' Sher steps back. 'Now there's a name I haven't heard in a while.'

I cringe, wishing I had not just put it out there like that. I should have broken her in slowly, gotten her used to the idea of seeing her again.

'Does this mean you're back together?' 'Yeah, um, we're still-friendly.' Shake my shoulder. 'I mean, actually, we're more than friends, we're more like-' I shrug, allowing my hair to fall in my face so it is partially hidden. Grasping a chunk and twisting it around, pretending to inspect for split ends even though I no longer get them.

Dating and doomed-destined to spend an eternity in the abyss-madly in love but unable to touch- 'Well, yes, I mean, I guess you could say we're back together again.' Forcing a smile so wide my lips practically split down the middle, but holding it anyway, hoping it will encourage her to join in.

'And you're okay with that?'

She runs her hand through her long hair, a shade we used to share the same color until I started drinking the solution which turned mine even lighter- her hers, then perches on the edge of my bed, crosses her legs, and drops her portfolio onto the floor-four bad signs that she is become peaceful in for one of her long, awkward talks.

Her gaze moves over me, taking in my faded jeans, my white tank top, searching for symptoms, hints, clues, telltale signs of adolescent distress.

Having only recently ruled out anorexia and or bulimia when my solution-fueled growth spurt added four inches to my height and bulked up my frame with a thin layer of muscle even though I never work out.

But the time it is not my arrival that has her unnerved, it is my- on-again-off-again- relationship with Naddalin, that is the issue. And even though that may be true, nothing about Naddalin and my relationship could ever be condensed into a chapter in a book. Having recently finished yet another parenting book claiming that a tumultuous relationship is a major cause for concern.

Like she is somehow too old for you-or-' She shrugs, unable to place it.
'Don't get me wrong, Never- Ever, I like Naddalin, I do.

She is nice and polite, and she is certainly very composed-and yet, there is something about that cool self-assurance, something that seems odd for a young man her age.

First, it was Haven with the whole telepathy thing, and now Jaylynn taking issue with her maturity and poise.

I push my hair off my face so I can see her better. She is the second person today who is noticed something off about her about us. And even though it is easy enough to explain, the fact that they are even noticing in the first place is what worries me.

'And while- I know there is only a few months between you, she somehow comes off as-more experienced. Too experienced.' Sheer shrugs. 'And I'd hate for you to feel pressured into doing something you're not quite ready for.'

I press my lips together and try not to laugh, thinking how she could not have gotten it more wrong. If I am the innocent maiden being chased by the big bad wolf, never imagining that I am the predator in the tale, dangerously pursuing my prey to the point of risking her life.

'Since no matter what she may say, you are in control of you, Never- Ever.

You are the one who decides who, where, and when. And no matter how you may feel about her, or any boy for that matter, they have no right to push their agenda on-' 'It is not like that,' I tell her, cutting in before it gets any more embarrassing than it already has. 'Naddalin's not like that. She is a perfect girl, an ideal girlfriend. Seriously, Jaylynn, you are way off course. Just trust me on the one, okay?'

She looks at me for a moment, brittle orange aura wavering, wanting to believe, unsure if she should.

Then she picks up her bag and heads for the door, stopping just shy of it when she says, 'I was thinking-'

I look at her, tempted to peek at her thoughts, despite my vow to never intentionally breach her privacy like that-unless it has an emergency of course, which it is not.

'Since school is letting out soon even if were back on Earth as normal looking girls we still have to go to school as if were normal girls of our age, and since I have not heard you mention any summer plans, I thought it might be good for you to find a job, spend a few hours each day working at something.'

'What do you think?'

'What do you think of as normal?'

What do I think...?

I gape, with bugging eyes, mouth dry, at a complete loss for words... I was, well, I think I should have peered into your head think over your thoughts more than my own, because, clearly this does succeed as a major agony call!

'Nothing full time or anything like that. There will be plenty of time for the beach and your friends. I just thought it would be good for you to-'

'Is it about money?'

My mind is reeling, frantic to find a way out...

If it is a simple matter of pitching in for the mortgage and groceries, then I will gladly produce whatever she needs.

Not even one day. Un-uh. No way, hell, she can even take whatever is left of my parent's life insurance policy for all I care, it did set me for life, after the fact... but what she cannot have is my summer.

'Ever, of course it's not about money- is it not yet that's also life no?' She averts her gaze as her cheeks flush soft pink.

Mysteriously averse to discussing all things economic for someone who makes a living as a nurse, on and off with the Earthing she chooses to be in within her life spans or within her old body too.

'I just thought it might be good for you to, you know, meet some new people, learn something new.'

'Get out of your usual environment for a few hours each day, and-' And get away from Naddalin.

Not needing to read her thoughts to know what this is about, now that she knows we are back together she is more strong-minded than ever to break us apart.

Besides, while I get how troubled she was by all the moodiness and despair, I lay open to her when we were apart, the time she got it all wrong.

It is not like she thinks. Though I've no idea how to explain that to her and keep my secrets intact. '-and as it so happens, a summer internship just opened for me, working with her as a LPN, and I'm sure, it's just a matter of speaking with the

senior partners, and the job will be mine.' Then she grins, face radiant, eyes bright, expecting me to join the fête as well- when I do it at last.

'But aren't those positions usually reserved for law students?' I ask, sure I am pathetically underqualified to fill those shoes.

But she just shakes her head. 'It is not that type of internship. This is more of a filing and phone answering assignment. And there is really no money in it either, though you will get school credit and a small end of the season bonus. I just thought it might do you some good. Not to mention how it will really beef up those college applications of yours.' College- yet, another thing I used to obsess about but not anymore.

I mean, what use could I have for all those classes and professors when all I must do is place my hand on a book or peek inside my teacher is hard to know all the answers? Cheating is too easy, yet miss honesty wants me to do it the hard way, I question why?

This is something that I have questioned her for years. If you have the power to take then do so-o, you are not hurting anyone but yourself.

'I'd hate for anyone else to get in there when I know you're just perfect for the job.'

I stare at her, unsure what to say.

'It's a pleasant experience for a person your age,' she adds, her indignant tone a result of my silence.

'It is suggested in all the books. They say it builds charisma, promise, and the chastisement to show up on time and get the job done.'

Great, So, I have Dr. Phil to thank for ruining my summer- I thought.

It is my fault she changed, I am annoyed with Jaylynn until I remember how she was when I first got her calm, tranquil, and completely laid back, allowing me all the space and freedom I needed.

My postponement, my rejection to ingest anything other than the pink solution, and all the drama with Naddalin are what sent her over the edge.

Besides this is where it led to the dreaded summer internship she is bent on securing for me.

But no way can I spend the summer juggling a mountain of files and incessantly ringing phones when I am going to need all the free time I can get to find an antidote for Naddalin.

And working in Jaylynn's office- within the nursing department within the Rosman building, with her and her colleagues praying over my shoulder, just will not do, sometimes I was just a little school girl still- I miss those days, and I think about and say within my mind not really- am meant to be genuinely happy?

Though it is not like I can say that outright. It will set off her alarms. I need to play it cool, let her know that while I've nothing against discipline and character building, I prefer to tackle those things on my own.

'I'm totally cool with working,' I say, trying not to press my lips together, fidget, or break eye contact, three definite giveaways that I am not being entirely honest. 'But since you do so much for me already, I would feel a lot better if I could find my own job. I mean, I am just not sure I am cut out for office work, so maybe I could look around a little. See what my options are. I will even pitch in with the mortgage and food. It is the least I can do.'

'What food?' She laughs, shaking her head at me.

'You barely eat! Besides, I do not want your money, Ever. Though I will help you establish a line of credit if you would like.'

'Sure.' I shrug, forcing an enthusiasm I do not feel since I do not need such conventional things. 'That would be great!' I add, knowing that the longer I can keep her mind off the internship, the better for me.

'Okay then.' She drums her fingers against the doorjamb as she completes her plan. 'You've got one week to find something on your own.'

I gulp, trying to keep the eye bugging to a minimum. One week? What kind of a head start is that when I do not even know where to begin? I have never had a job before. Is it possible to just manifest one?

'I know it's not much time,' she says, reading my face. 'But I'd hate for them to fill the position when I know you'd be perfect.'

She heads into the hall and closes the door between us, leaving me sideswiped, dumbstruck, staring at the flickering remnants of her orangey aura, her magnetic energy field, hovering insistently in the space where she stood. Thinking how ironic it is that I was just making fun of Naddalin for assuming she could land a job without any experience only to find myself facing the same fate.

I toss and turn all night. Bed a tangled mess of sweat-dampened pillows and blankets, body, and mind exhausted by dreams. Waking briefly, gasping for air, only to be pulled under again, returning to the very same place I fought to escape.

-And-

The only reason- I want it to stop is that Riley is there. Laughing happily as she grabs hold of my hand, taking me on a tour of a very strange land. But even though I skip right alongside her, pretending to enjoy the trip too, the moment she turns her back, I scramble for the surface, eager to remove myself from the scene.

Because the truth is, it is not Riley. Riley is gone. Having crossed the bridge at my urging, moving on to some unknown place. And even though she keeps yanking me back, yelling at me to pay attention, to just trust her and stop running-I refuse to obey. Sure, that is punishment for harming Naddalin, sending Haven to the Shadow worlds, and putting everything I care about at risk-allowing my subconscious to produce these guilt-induced images, so sugar-coated with happiness, there is no way they are real.

But the last time, just as I am about to run, Riley appears right before me, blocking my exit, and yelling at me to stay put. Standing before a large stage and slowly drawing the drapes, revealing a tall, narrow, rectangular cube-like prison of glass-containing a desperate and struggling Naddalin inside.

I rush to her aid as Riley looks on, pleading with her to hang in there while I help her break free. But she cannot even hear me. Cannot even see me. Just continues to fight until overcome with exhaustion, with absolute futility, she closes her eyes and fades straight into the abyss.

The home for lost souls.

I bolt from my bed, body shaking, chilled, drenched with sweat, standing in the center of my room with a pillow clutched to my chest. Overcome not only by the feeling of utter defeat but by the horrible message my imagined sister has sent-telling me that no matter how hard I try, I cannot save my soul mate from me.

I run for my closet, changing into some clothes before grabbing some sneakers and heading for the garage. Knowing it is too early to go to school, too early to go anywhere. But I refuse to give up. Refuse to believe in nightmares. I must start somewhere. Must use what I got.

But just as I am about to climb into my car, I think better. Realizing the entire process of opening the garage door and starting the engine will risk waking Jaylynn. And even though I can easily step outside and manifest another car, bike, Vespa, or whatever else I might want, I decided to try running instead.

I have never been so hostile before. Far more used to dragging my feet through every forced lap in PE than striving for any personal best. But that was before I became immortal. Before I was bestowed with incredible speed. A speed I have not even begun to test the limits of since the last time I ran was the first time I realized I even had the potential. But now that I am faced with the perfect opportunity to see just how far and fast I can go before stopping, dropping, or crumbling to the ground with a debilitating case of side cramps, I cannot wait to try it out.

I slip out the side door and head for the street. At first thinking, I should warm up, start in a nice slow jog before hitting the asphalt at full throttle. But no sooner have I started than a major surge of adrenaline kicks in, coursing through my body like the highest-grade rocket fuel. And the next thing I know, it is full

speed ahead. Running so fast my neighbor's houses are reduced to a visual blur of stucco and stone. Jumping fallen trash cans and dodging poorly parked cars, as I race from street to street with the grace and agility of a jungle cat. Having no awareness of my legs or my feet, just trusting they will not fail me. That they will get me to my destination in miraculous time.

-And-

No more than a few seconds have passed when I am standing before it, the one place I swore I would never return to, prepared to do the one thing I promised Naddalin I am wouldn't-approaching Naddalin's door, hoping to broker deal.

But before I can even raise my hand to knock, Naddalin is there. Clad in a deep purple robe over blue silk pajamas, her matching velvet slippers with embroidered golden foxes peeking out from the hem. Her gaze sleek, narrowed, looking me over without a trace of surprise.

'Ever.' She cocks her head to the side, allowing for an unobstructed view of her flashing Ouroboros tattoo. 'What brings you to the neighborhood?'

My fingers play at the amulet just under my shirt, heart racing beneath it, hoping Naddalin's right, that it will give the necessary protection-should it come to that.

'We need to talk,' I say, trying not to cringe as her eyes sail over me, enjoying a nice, long, leisurely cruise. Squinting into the night, then back at me. 'Do we?' She lifts her brow. 'And here I had no idea.'

I start to roll my eyes, but remembering my purpose for coming here, I settle for pressing my lips together instead.

'Recognize the door?' She raps her knuckles hard against the wood, eliciting a nice solid thump, as I wonder what she could be up to. 'Of course, you do not,' she says, lips quivering at the sides. 'That's because it is new. I was forced to replace the old one after your last visit. You remember? When you busted your way in so you could toss my supply of elixir down the drain?' She laughs and shakes her head. 'Very naughty of you, Ever. And quite a mess I must say. I hope you will manage to behave better today.' She leans against the door frame and waves me in, gazing at me in a way so deep, so intimate, it is all I can do not to squirm.

I heard down the hall and into the den, noticing how the door is not the only thing that has changed since I was last here. Gone are the framed Botticelli prints and abundance of chintz, all of it replaced by marble and stone, dark heavy fabrics, rough plastered walls, and black iron things shaped into scrolls.

'Tuscan?' I turn, startled to find her standing so near I can see the individual dark purple flecks in her eyes.

She shrugs, refusing to back up and give me some space. 'Sometimes I get a little hankering for the old country.' She smiles a slow widening of her cheeks, displaying shiny white teeth. 'As you well know, Ever, there's no place like home.'

I swallow hard and turn away, trying to decide my quickest escape since I cannot afford to make even the slightest mistake.

'So, tell me, to what do I owe the magnificent Jewell?' She glances over her shoulder as he hears for the bar. Removing a bottle of elixir from the wine refrigerator and pouring it into a cut crystal glass, before offering it to me. But I just shake my head and wave it away, watching as she carries it over to the couch where she poops herself down, spreads her legs wide, and rests the glass on her knee. 'I am assuming you did not quickly visit in the dead of night to admire my latest decorating scheme. So, tell me, what is the purpose of the?'

I clear my throat, forcing myself to look her square in the eye without flinching, wavering, fidgeting, or showing any other sign of weakness. Aware of how the whole situation can change in an instant-how easily I can turn from mild curiosity to irresistible prey.

'I'm here to call a truce,' I say, alert for a reaction but getting only her penetrating gaze. 'You know, a cease-fire, a proclamation of peace, a-'

'Please.' She waves her hand. 'Spare me the definition, luv. I can say it in twenty languages and forty dialects. Hey you?'

I shrug, knowing I am lucky to have said it is the one. Watching as she swirls her drink, the iridescent red liquid flashing and sparkling as it runs up the sides and splashes back down.

'And just what sort of truce are you after? You of all people should know how it works. I've no intention of giving you anything unless you are willing to give up something of your own.' She pats the narrow space just beside her, smiling as though I would consider joining her there.

'Why do you do that?' I ask, unable to hold my frustration. 'I mean, you're decent looking, you're immortal, you've got all the gifts that go with it-you can pretty much have anyone you want, so why do you insist on bothering me?'

She throws her head back and laughs, a giant roar that fills up the room. Finally calming down enough to level her gaze, looking at me as she says, 'Decent looking?' She shakes her head and laughs again, placing her glass on the table and retrieving a pair of golden nail clippers from a jewel-encrusted case.

'Decent looking,' she mutters, shaking her head, taking a moment to check out her nails, before returning her focus to me. 'But you see, Luv, that is just it. I can have anything I want. Anything or anyone.'

'It all comes so easy. Too easy.' She sighs, getting to work on her nails, so absorbed by the task, I am wondering if she will continue when she says, 'It all gets a little tedious after the first-oh-hundred or so years. And while you are far too new

to understand any of this, someday you will realize just how big of a favor I have done you.'

I squinted, having no idea what she could mean. A favor? Is she serious? 'You sure you won't have a seat?' She wags her nail clipper toward the overstuffed chair just to my right, urging me to take it. 'You're making me out to be an bad host, insisting on standing there like that. Besides, do you have any idea how fetching you look? A little-bedridden-sure, but in the sexiest way.'

She narrows her eyes until they are sleek as a cat's, lips parting just enough for her tongue to escape. But I just stay put and pretend not to notice. Everything with Naddalin is a game, and taking a seat would be conceding defeat. Though staying like that, being careful to wet her lips as her gaze lingers in all the wrong places, does not feel like much of a win.

'You're even more delusional than I thought if you think you've done me a favor,' I say, voice hoarse, scratchy, a long way from strong. 'You're crazy!' I add, regretting it the instant it is out.

But Naddalin just shrugs, unfazed by my outburst as he returns to her nails. 'Trust me, it is more than just a favor, luv. I have given you a purpose. A raison d'être as they say.' She glances at me, brow raised. 'Tell me, Ever, are you not completely fixated on finding a way to-consummate-with Naddalin? Are you not so desperate for a solution you convinced yourself it was a clever idea to come here?'

I swallow hard and stare at her. I should have known better, should have heeded Naddalin's advice.

'You're too impatient.' She nods, smoothing the edges of her freshly clipped nails. 'What's the rush when you have all of infinity laid out before you? Think about it, Ever, how exactly would you spend your eternity if it were not for me? Showering each other with huge bouquets of bloody red tulips? Having at each other so often it could not help but grow boring?'

'It is ridiculous.' I glare. 'And the fact that you see it like the-like it is some chivalrous deed that you've done-' I shake my head, knowing there is no need to continue. She is delusional, insane, figured out to see things in her selfish way.

'Hundred years within my body and others- it all the same, I yearned for her,' she says, tossing her nail clippers aside, gaze never once leaving mine.

'And why, you ask?

'Why would I bother with the same woman for so long when I can have anyone?' She looks at me as though waiting for the answer, but we both know I've no intention of going there.

'It wasn't just her beauty like you think-though I will admit, it did spur things at the start.' Her smiles, eyes reminiscent. 'No, it was the simple fact that I

could not have her. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how long I pined, I was never allowed'-her looks at me, gaze heavy, intense-'admittance-if you will.'

I turn my eyes. I cannot help it. The fact that she wasted centuries pining for that monster is of no interest to me.

But she just continues, ignoring my pained expression when she says, 'Make no mistake, Ever, I am about to share something very important, something you really should keep in mind.' She leans forward, arms on knees, voice steady and low, filled with new urgency. 'We always want what we can't have.' She leans back, nodding as though she just shared the key to enlightenment. 'It is human nature. We are the same. And as much as you would prefer not to believe it, it is the only reason Naddalin's spent the last four hundred years longing for you.'

I look at her, face placid, body still, aware that she is trying to hurt me, prodding the usual spots, knowing this has been one of my fears from the moment I first learned of our history.

'Face, it, Ever, even Haven's incredible beauty was not enough to keep her interested. I am sure you are aware of just how quickly she got tired of her?'

I swallow hard, stomach like a hard-bitter marble. Since when is two hundred years considered quickly? But I guess when you are dealing with eternity everything is relative.

'It's not a beauty contest,' I say, cringing when I hear the words spoken aloud. I mean, seriously, is that the best I could do?

'Of course, it is not, luv.' Naddalin shakes her head, pity in her gaze. 'If it were, Haven would win.' Her back settles, arms spread across the cushions, glass resting on top, daring me to respond. 'Let me guess, you've convinced yourself it's about two souls meeting as one, destined for each other, and all of that-puppy love?' She laughs, nodding when she adds, 'That is what you're thinking, right?'

'You don't want to know what I'm thinking.' I narrowed my gaze, decided to get to the point now that my patience's dissolved. 'I didn't come here to be bored by your philosophical litanies, I came here because.'

'Because you want something from me.' She nods, setting down her drink, glass meeting wood with a solid, wet thwomp. 'In which case, I am in the driver's seat, which means you're in no position to set the pace.'

'Why do you do that?' I shake my head, having grown bored with the game. 'Why do you bother where you know I am not interested? Surely you realize that no matter what you do to Naddalin and me, it will never bring Haven back. What happened. It can never be changed. And, in the end, all the game playing, all the nonsense you engage in-all it really does is prevent you from living your life-from moving on.' I continue to stare, gaze unwavering, convincing. Projecting an image of her handing over the antidote and cooperating with me. 'So, I am asking you, in

as reasonable a way as I can-please help me undo what you have done to Naddalin, so we can all coexist.'

She shakes her head, lids squinted tight. 'Sorry, darlin', the price is set. Now it is just a matter of whether you are willing to pay.'

I lean against the wall, tired, defeated, but not letting on. Knowing the one thing she wants is the one thing I will never give. The same old game Naddalin warned me about. 'You'll never have me, Naddalin. Never, ever, for as long as I-'

Not even getting to the more degrading, insulting part that comes next when she rises from the couch, moving so quickly her breath hits my cheek long before I can blink.

'Relax,' her whispers, face looming so close I can make out each flawless pore on her skin. 'As much fun as that might be, giving an amusing diversion at least, I am afraid that is not it. I am after something far more esoteric than a virginal shag. Though, if you would like to make a go of it, no strings attached, then I assure you, darlin', I am certainly up for the task.' Her smiles, deep blue eyes boring into mine, projecting the movie her plays in her head, the one starring her, and me, and a king-sized bed.

I look away, breath coming ragged, too fast, summoning every ounce of my will not to slam my knee in her groin when her nose glances my ear, my cheek, my neck, inhaling my scent.

'I know what you're going through, Ever,' she murmurs, lips brushing the tip of my ear. 'Longing for something so close and yet-you can never quite taste it. It is the kind of pain most people will never experience. But we know, don't we? You and I are joined in that way.'

I relax my fists and fight to steady myself. Knowing I cannot risk doing anything rash, cannot afford to overreact.

'Not to worry, she said.'

She smiles at me, slipping just out of my reach.

'You're a nifty girl.'

I am sure you will figure it out.

And if not-' Her shrugs. 'Well, nothing changes, right? Everything stays the same. You and I with our fates intertwined-for all of infinity.'

She slips down the hall, moving so fast it is a moment before I can make out her form. Tilting her head and urging me toward the door, practically pushing me onto her stoop when she says, 'Sorry to cut it so short. Though I do so with your reputation in mind. If Naddalin ever found out you were here-well, that could be tragic for you, couldn't it?'

Her smiles, all shiny white teeth, golden hair, tanned skin, and blue eyes-the ultimate California poster boy beckoning-Come live the good life in Laguna Beach!

And I am furious with myself-furious for being so stupid for not listening to Naddalin-for putting us further at risk. Handing Naddalin yet one more thing to lord over my head.

'Sorry you didn't get what you came for, Luv,' she purrs, her attention pulled by a vintage black Jaguar that pulls into the drive, having a gorgeous dark-haired couple who had it right inside. Closing the door behind them as she adds, 'Whatever you do, avoid Marco's car on your way out, she'll flip if you so much as smudge it.'

I walk home. Or at least, that is the direction I originally heard in. But somewhere along the way, I take a turn. Then another. And another. My feet move so slowly they practically drag, knowing there is no need to run, nothing to prove. Despite my strength and speed, I am no match for Naddalin. She is the expert of the game and I am merely her pawn.

I continue, deep into the heart of Laguna, or the Village, as it is called. Too awake to go home, too ashamed to see Naddalin, making my way through the dark, empty streets until stopping before a small, well-tended cottage, with flowering plants flanking either side of the door and a woven welcome mat placed just so, making it appear warm, friendly, completely benign.

Only it is not. Not even close. Now it is more like a crime scene. And unlike the last time I was here, the time I do not bother knocking. Ava's long gone. After

stealing the elixir and leaving Naddalin to fend for herself, she has no intention of returning.

I unlock the door with my mind and step in, taking a quick look around before I move past the den and into the kitchen. Surprised to find the usually well-ordered room reduced to an absolute mess-the sink piled high with dirty glasses and dishes as the trash overflows to the floor. And even though I am sure it has not Ava who has done the, clearly someone is here.

I creep down the hall, peering into a series of empty rooms until I get to the indigo door at the end-the one that leads to Ava's so-called sacred space where she used to meditate and try to reach the dimensions beyond. Opening the door just a crack and squinting into the dark, making out two sleeping figures sprawled on the floor. Skimming my hand along the wall and fruitlessly searching for a light, before remembering my ability to illuminate the room on my own only to find the last two people I ever expected to see.

'Rayne?' I kneel beside her, holding my breath as she rolls over and opens one eye.

'Oh Henry, Ever.' She rubs her eyes and struggles to sit. 'Only I am not Rayne, I am Javion. Rayne's over there.'

I glance at her twin at the far side of the room, noting the scowl that crosses her face the second she realizes it is me.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, focusing on Javion again since she has always been the nicer of the two.

'We live here.' Sheer shrugs, tucking her wrinkled white shirt into her blue plaid skirt as she gets off the floor.

I glance between them, taking in their pale skin, large dark eyes, and straight, black, shoulder-length hair with the razor-slashed bangs, noticing how they are both still dressed in the same private school uniforms as the first day we met. But unlike in School where they always appear so clean and pristine, now they are the opposite-sadly disheveled and completely uncared for.

'But you cannot live here. This is Ava's house.' Shake my head. The idea of them squatting here leaves me extremely unnerved. 'You should think about going home. You know, back to school with the other girl's?'

~*~

(Back at a castle- and at the school)

'We can't...'

Rayne pulls on her knee socks, making sure they are of exactly equal height, accidentally giving the only real clue that helps me tell them apart.

'Thanks to you, we're stuck here forever,' she mumbles, taking a moment to glare at me.

I glance at Javion, hoping she will explain.

But she just shakes her head at her sister, before looking at me. 'Ava's gone.'

Sher shrugs. 'But do not let Rayne give you the wrong impression. We are quite happy to see you. We had a running bet on how soon you would show.'

My gaze darts between them, laughing nervously as I say, 'Oh, really? Who won?'

Rayne rolls her eyes and points at her sister. 'Sher did. I was sure you had abandoned us for good.'

I pause, something about the way she just said that-'Wait, you mean you guys have been here the whole time?'

'We can't get back.' Javion shrugs. 'We've lost our magic.'

'Well, I am sure I can help you return. I mean, you do want to return-right?'
I look at them, seeing Rayne smirk as Javion just nods.

Knowing they will be a lot easier than they think since all I must do is make the portal, get them settled, then say my good-byes and make the return trip back to Laguna alone.

'We'd like that very much,' Javion says.

'And we would like to leave now,' Rayne adds, eyes narrowed. 'After all, it's the very least you can do.'

I swallow hard.

I deserve that, but I still wonder who is more desperate for them to leave, them or me?

I motion toward Rayne as I heard for the futon, wondering why neither of them thought to sleep on it instead of the floor.

'Come,' I say...

I was glancing over my shoulder.

'You sit here on my right, and Javion, you sit here.'

I pat the lumpy cushion on the sofa.

'Now grab my hands and close your eyes, then focus on seeing the portal with all of you.'

Imagining that golden Shermer of light as though it is before you.

Besides as soon as the image is clear, I want you to see yourself stepping right through, knowing I am right there beside you, keeping you safe.

Okay...?'

I peek at them, seeing them nod before we go through the motions, re-creating all the right steps.

But just as I step through the light and into that vast fragrant field, I open my eyes and find I am alone.

'Told you,' Rayne says, the second I return. Standing before me, eyes angry, small, accusing, pale hands clutching her plaid skirted hips.

And it is all because we tried to help you!' 'Told you our magic is gone. We are stuck here now with no way to get back.

'Rayne!' Javion shakes her head at her sister, then glances at me with an apologetic look on her face.

'Well, it's true!' Rayne glares. 'I told you we should not risk it. I told you she would not listen.'

~*~

I saw it clear as day. The overwhelming possibility she would make the wrong choice—which, I might add, she did!' She shakes her head and frowns. 'It went exactly as predicted. And now we are the ones paying the price.'

Oh, you are not the only ones, I think. Hoping they have lost their ability to read minds as well since I am immediately shamed by the thought. No matter how much she is annoying me, I know she is right.

'Listen,' I say, swallowing hard as I glance between them, needing to defuse them. 'I know how bad you want to get back. Believe me, I do.'

-And-

I am going to do everything I can to help you.' I nod, seeing them glance at each other, two identical faces marred by complete disbelief. 'I mean, I am not exactly sure how I am going to do it, but just trust that I will. I will do everything I can to help you get back. And in the meantime, I will do everything I can to keep you both comfortable and safe. Scout's Jewell.'

'All?'

Rayne looks at me, rolling her eyes, and having a sigh. 'Just get us back to School,' she says, arms crossing her chest. 'That's all we want. Nothing short of that will do.'

I nod, refusing to let her get to me when I say, 'Understood. But if I am going to help you, I will need you to answer some questions.'

They look at each other, Rayne's gaze signaling a silent: No way, as Javion turns, nodding at me as she says, 'Okay.'

...And even though I am not sure how to phrase it, it is something I have been wondering for a while now, so I just dive in. 'I'm sorry if this offends you, but I need to know—are you guys dead?' I hold my breath, fully expecting them to be mad, or at the very least insulted—pretty much any reaction but the laughter I get. Watching as they fall all over themselves, Rayne doubles over, slapping her knee,

as Javion rolls off the futon, practically convulsing. 'Well, you can't blame me for asking.' I frown, the one who is insulted. 'I mean, we did meet in School where plenty of dead people spend time together. Not to mention how you are both unnaturally pale.'

Rayne leans against the wall, fully recovered from her laughing fit and smirking at me. 'So, we are pale. Big deal.' She glances at her sister, then back at me. 'It's not like you're exactly rocking' a tan. And yet, you do not see us assuming you are a member of the dearly departed.'

I wince, knowing it is true, but still. 'Yes, well, you had an unfair advantage. Thanks to Riley you knew all about me long before we met. You know exactly who I am and what I am, and if I have any hope of helping you, then I am going to have to know a few things too. So-o as much as you may resent it, as much as you may want to resist, the only way we are going to get anywhere is if you tell me your story.'

'Never,' Rayne says, staring at her sister, warning her not to rebel.

But Javion ignores her and turns right to me. 'We're not dead. Not even close... We are more like-refugees. Refugees from the past if you will.'

I glance between them, thinking all I must do is lower my guard, focus my quantum remote, and touch them for their entire life story to be revealed, but figuring I should at least try to get their version first.

'A long time ago,' she starts, peering at her disapproving sister before taking a deep breath and forging ahead. 'A very long time ago, in fact, we were facing a-' She squinters her brow, searching for just the right word, nodding at me when she says, 'Well, let us just say we were about to become victims of a terribly dark event, one of the most shameful times in our history, but we escaped by fleeing to School. And then, well, we lost track of time and we have been there ever since. Or at least until last week when we came to help you.'

Rayne groans, dropping to the floor and burying her face in her hands, but Javion just ignores her, still looking at me when she says, 'But now our worst fear has come true. Our magic is gone, we've nowhere to go, and no idea how to survive in the place.'

'What sort of persecution did you flee?' I ask, watching her closely, searching for clues. 'And how long ago is exceptionally long ago? Just what are we dealing with here?' Wondering if their history stretches as far back as Naddalin's, or if they belong to a more recent past.

They gaze at each other, communicating a wordless agreement that shuts me right out. So I move toward Javion, grasping her hand so quickly she has no time to react. Immediately pulled into her mind-her world-seeing the story unfold as though I am right there. Standing on the sidelines, an unnoticed observer, fully

immersed in the chaos and fear of that day, witness to images so horrible I am tempted to turn away.

Watching as an angry mob swarm their home, voices raised-torchers high-their aunt barring the door as best she can, making the portal and urging the twins toward the safety of School.

About to step through the portal and join them when the door gives way and the twins disappear. Separated from everything they once knew, having no idea what became of their aunt until a visit to the Great Halls of Learning showed them the torturous trial of false accusations she was forced to endure. Refusing to confess to any kind of sorcery, having taken the Wiccan Rede of 'An it harm none, do what ye will,' and knowing she had done nothing wrong, she rebuffed her oppressor and herald hurl herald high-all the way to the gallows where she was brutally hung.

I stagger back, fingers seeking the amulet just under my tee, something about their aunt's gaze so eerily familiar, leaving me shaky, unsettled, reminding myself that I am safe, they are safe-that things like that do not happen these days.

'So now you know.' Javion shrugs as Rayne shakes her head. 'Our whole story. Everything about us. Do you blame us for choosing to hide?'

I glance between them, unsure what to say. 'I-' I clear my throat and start over. 'I am so sorry. I had no idea.' I glance at Rayne, seeing how she refuses to

look at me, then over at Javion who solemnly bows hurl herald. 'I had no idea you guys escaped the Salem Witch Trials.'

'Not exactly,' Rayne says, before Javion cheers in.

'What she means is we were never tried. Our aunt stood accused. One day she was revered as the most sought-after midwife, and the next, she was rounded up and taken away.' She sucks in her breath, eyes welling up as though it were yesterday.

'We would've gone with her, we had nothing to hide,' Rayne says, lifting her chin and narrowing her gaze. 'And it certainly was not Clara's fault that poor baby died. It is the father who did it. She did not want the baby or its mother. So she did away with them both and blamed Clara. Crying so loud the entire town herald-but then Clara made the portal, and forced us to hide, and she was about to join us when-well, you know the rest.'

'But that was over three hundred years ago!' I cry, still unused to the idea of existence that long despite my immortality.

The twins shrug.

'So if you haven't been back since-' I shake my head, the monumental size of the problem just beginning to unfold. 'I mean, do you have any idea how much

things have changed since you were last here? Really? It is like a whole different world from the one that you left.'

'It's not like we're idiots.' Rayne shakes her head. 'Things progress in School too, you know. New people arrive all the time, manifesting the things they are attached to, all the stuff they cannot bear to let go.'

But that is not what I meant, in fact, not even close. I was not just referring to cars versus horse-drawn carriages, and trendy boutiques versus hand sewn—but more their ability to get along in the world—blending in, adapting, not standing out in the glaring way that they do! Taking in their razor-slashed bangs, their large dark eyes, and extremely pale skin, knowing their twenty-first-century makeover is far less about a uniform change than a complete and total overhaul.

'Besides, Riley prepared us,' Javion says, eliciting a loud groan from Rayne, and my full attention from me. 'Sher manifested a private school and convinced us to enroll. That is where these uniforms came from. Sher was our teacher, coaching us on all the modern ways, including our speech. She wanted us to return and was determined to prepare us for the trip. Partly because she wanted us to look after you, and partly because she thought we were crazy for missing our teens.'

I freeze, suddenly grasping a new understanding in Riley's interest in them—one that has far less to do with me, and everything to do with her. 'How old are you

guys?' I whimper, looking to Javion for the answer. 'Or should I say, how old were you when you first arrived in School?' Knowing they have not aged a day since.

'Thirteen,' Javion says, knitting her brow. 'Why?'

I close my eyes and shake my head, stifling a laugh as I think: I knew it!

Riley always dreamed of the day she would be thirteen, a bona fide teenager having finally made it to the important double digits. But after dying at twelve, she chose to hang around the earth plane, living her adolescence vicariously through me. So it only makes sense she would try to convince Javion and Rayne to return, not wanting anyone else to miss out like her.

-And-

If Clara can find the strength, and Riley the hope, in situations so incredibly dire and bleak, surely I can overcome Naddalin.

I glance between the twins, knowing they cannot stay here on their own or come home to live with Jaylynn and me, though there is quite able and ready, if not entirely willing to lend us a hand.

'Grab your stuff,' I say, heading for the door. 'I'm taking you to your new home.'

The second we step outside I realize we will need a car. And since I am more interested in speed than comfort, especially after seeing the way the twins

cling to each other as they gaze around warily, I manifest something that will get us there fast and quickly herd them in. Ordering Javion to sit on Rayne's lap as I get myself settled and step on the gas, navigating the streets with surprising skill, while the twins practically spend time together the window, gaping at all that we pass.

'Have you guys been inside the whole time?' I glance at them, never having seen anyone react to the beauty of Laguna Beach in quite the same way.

They nod, never once averting their gaze. Squirming in their seat as I pull up to the gate. Allowing the uniformed guard to peer through the window and scrutinize them, before letting us in.

'Where are you taking us?' Rayne eyes me suspiciously. 'What's with the guards and big gates? Is this prison?'

I heard up the hill, glancing at her when I said, 'Don't you have gated communities in School?' Never actually having seen one myself, but then again I have not lived there for the last three centuries as they have.

They shake their heads, eyes wide, clearly on edge.

'Not to worry.' I turn onto Naddalin's street and into her drive. 'It is not a prison, that is not what the gates are for. They are more to keep people out rather than in.'

'But why would you want to keep people out?' they ask, two childlike voices blending into one.

I squinted, having no idea how to answer since it is not like I was raised like that either, all the communities in my old hood were direct access. 'It's meant to keep people-' I start to say safe, but that is not it either. 'Anyway.' Shake my head. 'If you are going to live here, then you better get used to it. That is all there is.'

'But we're not going to live here,' Rayne says. 'You said this was just a temporary fix until you find a way to get us back, remember?'

I take a deep breath and grip the wheel harder, reminding myself how scared she must feel, no matter how bratty she gets.

'Of course it's temporary.' I nod, forcing a smile. Or at least it better be, because if not, someone is going to be extremely displeased. I climb out of the car and motion for them to follow, saying, 'Ready to see your new temporary home?'

I heard for the door, the two of them close at my heels as I stand right before it, debating whether I should knock and wait for Naddalin to open it or just stride right in since he is asleep. And I am about to do the latter when Naddalin swings the door open, takes one look at me, and says, 'Are you okay?'

I smile, tacking on a telepathic message of: Before you say anything-anything at all-just try to stay calm and give me a chance to explain-her eyes curious, questioning as I say, 'Can we come in?'

She moves aside, eyes wide with shock when Javion and Rayne step out from behind me and barrel right into her. Skinny arms wrapped around her waist, gazing up at her adoringly as they squeal, 'Naddalin! It is you! It is really you!' And as nice as the little reunion is, I cannot help but notice how their reaction to her, with all the love and excitement, is the opposite of their reaction to me.

'Hery.' She greets, tangling their hair and bending down to plant a kiss on the top of their heads. 'How long has it happened?' She pulls away and squints.

'Last week,' Rayne says, complete adoration displayed on her face. 'Flashes before Ever added her blood to the antidote and wrecked everything.'

'Rayne!' Javion bounces between her sister and me, shaking her head. But I just let it go. This is one battle I will never win.

'I meant ere that.' Naddalin squints into the distance, trying to remember the date.

They look at her, a mischievous gleam in their eyes when they say, 'It was just over six years ago when Ever was ten!'

I gape, eyes practically popping out of my head as Naddalin laughs. 'Ah, yes. And I have you two to thank for helping me find her. And since you know how much she means to me, I would relish your kindness moving her. That is not too much to ask-is it?' She chuckles under the chin, causing her to smile as her cheeks flush bright pink.

'So, to what do I owe the incredible Jewel?' She leads us into the still empty living room. 'Of being reunited with my long-lost friends, who, I might add, haven't aged a day since we met.'

They look at each other and giggle, clearly prepared to be charmed by anything she says. And before I can even think of a reply, find the right words to slowly break her in and get her used to the idea of their living with her, they look at each other and shout, 'Ever said we could live with you!'

Naddalin glances at me, a smile still planted on her face, as a look of pure horror creeps into her eyes.

'Temporarily,' I add, gaze upon her, sending a barrage of telepathic red tulips her way. 'Just until I find a way to get them back to School, or their magic returns, whichever comes first.' Tacking on a mental note of Remember when you said you wanted to improve your karma, to make up for your past? Well, what better way than to help someone in need? And the way you can keep the house since you will

need the extra space. It is the perfect solution. Everybody wins! Nodding and smiling so eagerly I am like a bobblehead doll.

Naddalin glances first at me, then the twins, laughing and shaking her head when he says, 'Of course you can stay. For as long as you need. So, what do you say we all heard upstairs so you can pick out your rooms?'

I sigh, my perfect boyfriend proving herself even more perfect. Following behind as the twins race up the stairs-happy, giggling, completely transformed now that they are in Naddalin's care.

'Can we have the room?' They ask, eyes lighting up as they stand in the doorway of Naddalin's special room that is still devoid of her things.

'No!' I answer too quickly, wincing when they turn, eyes narrowed and glaring at me. But even though I feel bad about the negative start, I have decided to return the room to its normal state, and there is no way I can do that if they are camping in it. 'It's taken,' I add, knowing it did nothing to soften the blow. 'But there is plenty more, the place is huge, you will see. There is even a pool!'

Javion and Rayne glance at each other before marching down the hall heads bobbing together, whispering, not bothering to hide their annoyance with me.

You could have just given it to them, Naddalin thinks, close enough to send a charge through my veins.

I shake my head and walk silently alongside her, telepathically replying, I want to see it filled with your things. Even though they no longer mean anything to you, they mean a great deal to me. You cannot toss out the past—cannot just turn your back on the things that defined you.

She stops, turning to me as she says, 'Ever, we are not defined by our things. It is not the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive, the art we acquire—it is not where we live—but how we live that defines us.' Her gaze bores into mine, as she gathers me into a telepathic embrace, the effect seeming so real, it robs me of breath. 'It's our actions that are remembered long after we're gone,' she adds, smoothing my hair as her lips telepathically meet mine. ...True. I smile, enhancing the image he created with tulips and sunsets and rainbows and cupids and all manner of clichéd Dadaistic themes that make us both laugh. Except that we are immortal, I add, decided to sway her to my side. Which means none of that applies. So, with that in mind, we can just—but I do not even get to finish before the twins call for us, shouting, 'The room! I want one!'

Since the twins are so used to being together, I was sure they would want to share the same space and even get bunk beds or something. But the moment they checked out the size of the next room, and the one after that, they each staked their claim and never looked back. Spending the next several hours directing Naddalin and me to decorate down to their most minute specifications, demanding we

manifest beds, dressers, and shelves, only to change their minds, have us empty the room, and start all over again.

But if Naddalin was using her magic, I did not complain. I was far too relieved to see her manifesting again, even if she was still refusing to manifest anything for herself. By the time we finished, the sun was starting to rise, and I knew I had better return home before Jaylynn woke up and noticed I was gone.

'Don't be surprised if I don't make it to school today,' she says, walking me to the front door.

I sigh, hating the thought of going without her.

'I cannot leave them here on their own. Not until they get settled in.' She shrugs, hooking her thumb over her shoulder and pointing upstairs where the twins are finally, mercifully, asleep in their beds.

I nod, knowing she is right and vowing to get them back to school soon before they get too comfortable here.

'I'm not sure that's the solution,' she says, sensing my thoughts.

I squint, unsure where she is going, but getting an uncomfortable ping in my gut nonetheless.

'I've been thinking-' She cocks her head to the side, thumb tracing her stubble-lined chin. 'They've been through a lot-losing their home, their families,

everything they've ever known and loved-their lives taken so abruptly, they hadn't had a chance to even live them-' She shakes her head. 'They deserve a real childhood, you know? A fresh start in the world-'

I gape, wanting to respond but the words just will not come. Because while I also want them to be happy and safe and all those things, as far as the rest goes, we are no longer on the same page. I was planning for a short little visit, a couple of days, or at the very worst weeks. Never once did I entertain the idea of becoming surrogate parents, especially to twins who are just a few years younger than me.

'It was just a thought.' He shrugs. 'The decision is theirs. It is their life.'

I swallow stimulating and prevent my gaze, telling myself there is annihilation that must be settled just yet, going toward my manifested car when Naddalin says, 'Always. Relly, a pickup truck?'

Part: 3

She cocks her head to the side, squinting in faux contemplation and rubbing her chin as she says, 'Really? Most people claim to see a resemblance. Though, I must admit, I am with you, never seen it myself.'

'You're related to Lina?' I gape, hoping my voice did not sound as panicked to her ears as it did mine.

'Sher's my grandmother.' He nods. 'Name's Naddalin.'

She offers her hand, long, tanned, fingers extended, waiting for mine. But even though my curiosity is piqued, I cannot do it. Despite my interest, despite my wondering why she makes me feel so-flustered and off balance-I cannot risk the barrage of knowledge a single touch brings when my psyche is disturbed.

I nod, responding with the stupid, embarrassing half-wave, as I mumble my name. Trying not to wince when she gives me an odd look and lowers her hand again.

'So, now that that's covered-' She slings her damp towel over her shoulder, sending a spray of sand through the room. 'I'm back to my original question, what are you doing in here?'

I turn, feigning sudden interest in a book on dream interpretation when I say, 'I am sticking with my original answer, which was browsing, in case you have forgotten. Surely you allow browsers in here?' I turn, meeting her gaze-those amazing sea-green eyes reminding me of an ad for a tropical getaway. Something about them is so-indefinable-startling-and yet strangely familiar-though I am sure I have never seen her before.

Now laughing, pushing a tangle of golden dreads off her face, and exposing a scar slicing right through her brow, gaze landing just to my right as she says, 'And yet, after all the summers I've spent here, watching customers browse the merchandise, I've never once seen someone browse quite like you.'

Her lips pull at the sides, as her eyes study mine. Then I turn, cheeks hurting, heart racing, taking a moment to compose myself before turning back to say, 'You've never seen someone browse the back cover? That is a little odd, don't you think?'

'Not with their eyes closed.' She tilts her head to the side and focuses on the space to my right once again.

I swallow hard, flustered, shaky, knowing I need to change the subject before I sink any deeper. 'Maybe you should be more concerned with how I got in here instead of what I am doing in here,' I say, wishing I could take it back the second it is out.

She looks at me, gazes narrowed. 'Figured I left the door open again. Are you saying I did not?'

'Nope!' I shake my head, hoping she does not notice the way my cheeks color and heat. 'No, that's-that is exactly what I am saying. You did leave the door open,' I add, trying not to fidget, blink, press my lips together, or otherwise give myself away. 'Wide open in fact, which is not only a waste of air-conditioning but totally-' I stop, my stomach going weird when I see the smile at play on her lips.

'So, a friend of Lina's, huh?' She moves toward the register, dropping her towel on the counter in a wet, sandy thud. 'Never heard her mention you before.'

'Well, we weren't exactly friends.' I shrug, hoping it did not look as awkward as it felt. 'I mean, I met her once and she helped me with-wait, why did you just phrase it like that? You know, all past tense. Is Lina okay?'

She nods, perching on a stool, grabbing a purple cardboard box from a drawer, and flipping through a bunch of receipts. 'Sher's on one of her annual retreats. Picks a different one each year. The time it is Mexico to linger within. Trying to decide if the Mayans were right and the world will end in 2012. What is your take?'

She looks at me, green eyes curious, insistent, boring right into mine. But I just scratch my arm and shrug, never having heard that theory before and wondering if it applies to Naddalin and me. Is that when we will hear for the Shadow worlds, or will we be forced to wander barren Earth-the last two survivors responsible for repopulating the land-only-irony alert-if we touch, Naddalin dies- I shake my head, eager to escape that thread before it can take hold and mess with my head. Besides, I am here for a reason and I need to stick with the plan.

'So how do you know her? If you were not exactly friends.'

'I met her through Ava,' I say, hating the feel of her name on my lips.

She rolls her eyes, mumbling something unintelligible and shaking her head.

'So, you know her?' I look at her, allowing my gaze to travel to her face, her neck, her shoulders, her smooth tanned chest, making my way down to her navel, before forcing myself to look away again.

'Yeah, I know her.' She pushes the box aside, gaze meeting mine. 'Just up and disappeared the other day-into thin air from what I can tell-'

Oh, you do not know the half of it, I think, carefully watching her face.

Interval: 3 Passed November

Part:

Bizarre coruscations they said to me, as I remember, it is not the dead that we need to fear, it is the living yet by the end of nothing more than being a soul I would think not.

Life has its stages, working hard in school as a young child, being a teen that dislikes everything that your mom and dad say, to work less than a bum, a tramp, a vagrant. A lazy or shiftless person, especially one who seeks to live solely with the support of others.

An incompetent, insignificant, or obnoxious person: The batter called the pitcher a bum. One who spends a lot of time doing a particular recreational activity at achievements, then there are the stages of young lust and love, and the disappointment, of having it and not, then they're seeing others move forward more

than yourself, then there is working like a crazy with your college degrees, then know that the next stage is playing house, find the one in a stage of babies, cars, and homes and investments, and then older age creeps up on you and you feel lost looking down say where did the time go?

Then it is having a 5-year-old, and then 10, then 18, and you are a grandparent, and the stages start anew, a year goes past November, then December and the year is lost to time and age, then the comfort of death is the only thing keeping you alive as death consumes your body within and then shows on the outside.

All the days, I and we think that we remember. I remember when everyone was jabbed with the vaccine and those that did not have all parched now, in the times of biological war. I wonder what was worse. Though away kids' trough away life, through away society everything ended with jabbing needles in arms all death.

Reliving the past-

November- Do you remember? In the street, where people meet. We would wander around in the springtime heat. Do you remember? Clipping wings until you are thirty.

Every morning we would still be yarning,

All these days are gone all alone. I wish I had you near me, I need you here all night long until the light through the window is gone. All summer long. Said another day had come until the fall, days were lazy...

...And sometimes drive us all crazy. All these days are gone all alone, I had you near me. I wish I had you here. In the street where we would meet, wander around in the northern heat. Do you remember? Do you remember?

...Every morning, every night...

Still yawning. The good old days and long nights we spent together cannot be forgotten, I cannot forget. We cannot forget changes in time spent together.

I still remember. The days passed in November.

~*~

Jaylynn

Jaylynn- That is the title of my autobiography, the aroma of a toilet. My eardrums are not your toilet. Clown Court Jester is the sum-up of life or the kid's first instance of the rainbow ball pits falling headfirst. I am in the world of having the checkerboard black and white flag. Black and white clothing, whether stripes or

checkered, is the girl clown of the modern day, which has to do with the dual way that many celebrities live, often toggling between their regular life and slave life.

Diamond has to do with the 'Presidential Model' and the highest level for sex slaves. Handlers are mysterious and shadowy controllers, sometimes pretending to be security or entourage to stay close to the victim and better control their every action. They control their slave victim with certain code words, code names, and triggers, which brings out certain alters that do certain jobs under a different personality.

They keep celebrities isolated from others. Celebrities sometimes switch to other alters on live television because certain triggers or codewords are used, which takes this celebrity to a different personality, ready to perform certain actions.

Beta Sex Kitten alters have to do with dressing like a wildcat, often tiger, leopard, or lion. Moreover, Mickey Mouse's ears and MK-Ultra Disney also symbolize MK-Ultra's mind control.

Disney movies and shows are filled with dark symbolism, including cartoon movies. One eye bigger than the other, or bleaching hair to platinum blonde color or wearing a platinum blonde wig.

Monarch Butterflies symbolism, mostly placed in a subliminal manner so that it blends into the background as well as does not appear as obvious. Mirrors, especially cracked or shattered mirrors, have to do with shattered and fractured personalities created by traumatic mind control. Such trauma leads to eventual

breakdown or meltdown, around 27 or 28, and they start rebelling from their handler.

They are likely to go into Rehab for MK-Ultra mind control trauma-induced acts to make them obey.

I remember being called the prima donna a very temperamental person with an inflated view of their talent or importance.

Cut-

'If you are going to be stupid, be increasingly, impressively stupid. Be brilliantly stupid.'

Remembering my meetings for my education: Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition of variable severity with lifelong effects that can be recognized from early childhood, chiefly characterized by difficulties with social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior.

The chatter of saying this and that: and there must be more than this than that.

(Readings of documents aloud.)

Phasis on the positive reinforcement of Jaylynn's IEP plains, with a clear present, direct message and provide acceptable options for behavior, implement immediate reactions with inappropriate behavior redirect and then take advantage

of specific behavior management behaviors, directly comply then plan for inappropriate peer interactions, on The task of all authority characters to use, accommodations for state/region assessment: use pat in state and region ratings with the following accommodations: read the test, quoting only,) and test in 4 separate rooms or smaller responses in the test booklet instead of on the answer sheet. Recommendations for reviewing the program of proposals:

The IEP team should consider continuing Jaylynn's current educational program. Phasis on positive reinforcement. Provide clear and direct messages. Provide acceptable options for behavior.

Provide immediate feedback with inappropriate behavior redirection, appropriate behavior management.

Behaviors and compliance with direct planning of inappropriate peer interactions, during the tasks of all the power figures.

Accommodation for state/county assessment: Then in state and county level assessments with the following accommodations: reading test cited only,) testing in 4 separate rooms or smaller confessions in the test booklet instead of testing. The answer sheets.

Recommendations for reviewing the program of proposals:

The IEP team should consider continuing Jaylynn's current educational program.

Test done:

(— No adjustments/modifications needed

1 — Boost activity or content

2 — Adapting/modifying activity or content

3 — Use parallel activity or content

4 — Use an alternative activity or alternative result

Conclusions and recommendations made to the Recommendations

Program Team:

Recommendation on the continuing need for special education:

Jaylynn continues to meet the criteria for a student with a specific learning disability, emotional: disorder, speech, and language disability, and needs specially designed education in...

Learning Support Program, Emotional Support Program, Speech, and Language support program.

The level of support should remain the same.

Review of the student program:

The students' progress in the general curriculum:

Reading: Limited

Language Arts: Limited

Mathematics: Limited

Science: Partly mastered a social study: partly mastered.

Educational activities that have succeeded:

Teaching skills and concepts at the educational level of the student.

Divide learning units into small controllable steps.

Save the student enough time to answer questions, complete assignments, or tests.

Reduce the number of homework or duties.

Determine the number and length of directions.

Read directions for students.

Provide additional opportunities for frequent practice.

Provide noble and fair oral comments.

Provide individual instruction or a small group.

Use collaborative learning in situations that do not require direct education.

Peer lessons. Always provide an orderly environment.

Provide preferential seats and gatherings in the classroom.

Use study guides or detailed charts.

Use homework papers or home notebooks, Read the student's test questions. Allow more time to perform tests. Determine the number of test items, use graph behavior or contract points/ clash.

Student retention rates (materials retained over time) are estimated as follows: less information is retained than their average reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Environmental assessment results:

Jaylynn can care for his personal, social, emotional, and physical needs.

Results of the evaluation of vocational-technical education:

Jaylynn does not attend technology, so an avocational and technical education assessment has not been made.

Interests, preferences, preparations:

Transition planning does not occur until the student is at least 14 years old.

Results of functional behavioral evaluation:

Nevah's parents were deemed insufficient for IEP, whose school took over the rights of the child.

Jaylynn presents the following behaviors: speaking inappropriately, off-duty during education, teasing others, off the job while working independently, refusing to comply, and arguing. Jaylynn will say inappropriate things thinking that he is being 'cutesy.' Sometimes she will eavesdrop on adult conversations and respond to conversations with inappropriate responses.

'She does not, at times, pay attention.' So, the TSS keeps him on the job. She likes to have TSS do things for her like having her own 'server.' She will call children's names 'Four Eyes'.

Jaylynn will become stubborn and refuse to comply.

Precedents for problem behaviors (events that appear to lead to rapid behavior or triggers)

Include when giving an order/route unstructured setting (cafeteria,) when submitting a challenging task, and when submitting a writing task. Common factors (slow triggers) include specific learning disabilities, a history of the family disorder, and history of atrazine/ neglect.

The following consequences, interventions, and outcomes problem behaviors include verbal praise, reprimand/ warning/ redirection, parent communication, use of behavior scheme/ code/ point system, planned to ignore, or lose privileges.

Perceived functions of behaviors gain the attention of peers and adults, need to belong, seek to control others (feel more than anxious/inferior,) seek revenge 'get up,' and seek leadership.

Strengths:

Oral expression - precise motor skills are required. The following levels of support for baby inhibitors.

General knowledge base - word identification, decryption skills, reading understanding, language understanding, written language, general problem-solving skills, spelling, and math calculation.

Logic mathematics, improved attention span, increased mission continuity, improved ability to follow directions, increased ability to work independently, and complete work within schedules. Get the job done more accurately/ carefully.

Improve organizational skills, prepare more for classroom tests increase class participation start appropriate peer interactions reduce peer conflicts follow classroom and school tiles, reduce inappropriate attention-seeking, increase compliance with other adults' directives: increase structural analysis in words and sentences, increase auditory discrimination, (vocal sequencing and identify similarities and differences.)

Period related to necessity:

This student's educational needs are stills

Placement:

Reading: Special 3

Language Arts: Special 3

Mathematics: Regular 1

Science: Regular 1

Social Studies: Regular 1

Health: Regular 1

Physical education: regular 0

As important as it is recommended to design specifically:

Support level - required, a summary of results/interpretation of evaluation results:

No individual assessments have been made for this comprehensive biennial assessment - report. This assessment of student progress is considered information from parents and teachers across multiple educational environments to reduce bias.

The current student's performance is to extend the civil school year: if necessary, and currently.

There is evidence that the student has maintained skills related to IEP goals after breaks in education without significant decline.

Progress the student towards achieving the goals:

Vocabulary reading to 85% retention and 64 wpm level 2 grade use some progress - improving understanding both oral and written to 92% some progress.

Using the drill sandwich strategy is a way children can practice and learn new sight words, math facts, vocabulary, spelling words, or information by mixing what they know with what they need to learn.

This method is typically more motivating to the learner, since out of a group of ten flashcards, seven are already known. This permits the brain to focus on only learning three new pieces of information while reviewing known (often recently learned) material.

The repetition of the known material assists with its storage into long-term memory. The following are steps to building a drill sandwich.

Improve spelling to 90% on level 3 using 15 words some progress, improve in English using the correct initials and punctuation some progress-

Similarly, the improvement in parts of speech hosting some progress, improving in word analysis skills with current minimal progress. Thus, the improvement in auditory discrimination (similarities and differences between some words) minimum progress increases the ability to engage in positive peer

interactions as evidenced by fewer behavioral incidents in school and some progress.

Educational evaluation results:

Student educational levels (actual grade level of curriculum materials that the student is taught as follows: At this time-

Reading: 1 Regressing

Language Arts: 1 No Regressing

Mathematics: 3 Grades Made

Science: 3 Regressing

Social studies: 3 Regressing

Student acquisition rates (physical learning while teaching) are estimated as...

The following:

Requires more repetition than his average reading, language, mathematics, Science with Social Studies.

~*~

My mother said this to me.

Yet you believe in your schizoaffective disorder if you want to, and all the junk above they said. Due to past teaching of believing something that is not true. Your superior and above all the rest.

You are a lefty. You often freak out over the littlest things. You have a good sense of humor. You are a little on the nosy side. You are a night owl. You are extremely sensitive or easily distracted. You walk a lot.

You realize how much knowledge you still lack. You are an expert in self-control. You often procrastinate. You are constantly munching on something.

You fall asleep from time to time during the day. You do not smoke; you are not very loud; you can find a connection between anything, you are a liberal, you ask yourself big questions. You are super loyal, you have surprising hobbies, you like taking risks.

You bite your nails. Smart people love cats. Smart people easily adapt. You sense when you are being lied to. You are self-sufficient. Sometimes you are messy. You do not lie to yourself. You can hold your emotions when it is necessary. You always make plans.

You like being lazy sometimes. You do not get stuck in the past. You make mistakes. You do not prove anything to anyone. You know what finger ration means.

You prefer being alone. You learned to read at an incredibly youthful age. You are the oldest child in the family. You took music lessons at some point. You

do not suffer from obesity. You do not really like physical activity. You have blue eyes. You are extremely sensitive to noise.

Your ring finger is longer than your index finger. You panic easily. You have a bit of a potty mouth. If you can admit that you are bad at some things. If you wear the same clothes every day. If you can feel what others are thinking. If you can control yourself. If your eyes are blue at times.

(What?)

If you are a chocolate lover. When you are upset you know what is bothering you? If you talk to yourself. If you cannot stand any background noises. If your handwriting is messy.

Part:

Naddalin- I love the girls that are born-again virgins. Or like looking at your boy's skin on his shaft next to the head and seeing how many small cut markings on it to show the girls he has been with, like a notch in a belt. Like the next time, you see her she is not wearing panties to show you. So, I called her house, her cell, but nothing. Finally did a drive-by to make sure she was okay, and the lights were on, so it is clear she has been dodging me.' Her head. 'Left me with a bunch of angry clients, demanding a reading. Who would have thought she would turn out to be such a flake Jaylynn that is?'

Yes, who would have thought? Certainly not the person who was foolish enough to place her deepest darkest secrets right into her greedy, outstretched, hands...

'Still have not found anyone good enough to replace her though. And let me tell yah, it is impossible to give readings and take care of the store. That is why I stepped out just now.' She then shrugs. 'Surf was calling and I needed a break. Guess I left the door open again.'

Her eyes meet mine, sparkling and deep as they did when she was Elody in all the times of the past, and as of now, two she on the inside is always the same.

...And I cannot tell if he honestly believes she left the door open, or if he suspects me. But when I try to peer into her head to see for myself, I am stopped by the wall she is erected to safeguard her thoughts from people like me. All I must go by is the brilliant purple aura I failed to see before-its color waving and shimmering, beckoning to me.

'So far all I have is a stack of applications from amateurs. But I am so desperate to get my weekends back, I am ready to toss their names in a bowl and pick one just to get it over with.' She shakes her head and flashes those dimples again.

...And even though part of me cannot believe what I am about to do, the other part, the more practical part, urges me on, recognizing the perfect opportunity when it is standing before me.

'Maybe I can help.' I held my breath as I waited for her reply. But when my only response is a set of narrowed lids accompanied by the slightest curling of lips, I add, 'Seriously. You do not even have to pay me!'

Her squints even further, those amazing green eyes practically disappearing.

'What I meant was you don't have to pay me all that much,' I say, not wanting to come off as some weird desperate freak who gives it away for free. 'I'll work for just over minimum wage-but only because I'm so good I'll be living off the tips.'

'You're psychic?' She folds her arms and tilts her head back, gazing at me with complete disbelief.

I straighten my posture and try not to fidget. Hoping to appear professional, mature, someone he can trust to help run her store. 'Yes.' I nod, unable to keep from wincing, unused to confiding my abilities to anyone, much less a stranger. 'I just sort of know things-information just sort of comes to me-it's hard to explain.'

She looks at me, wavering, then focusing just to my right as she says, 'So what exactly are you then?'

I shrug, fingers playing with the zipper on my hoodie, drawing it up and down, down, and up, having no idea what she means.

'Is your clairaudient, clairvoyant, clairsentient, circumstance, Clair scent, or Clair tangency? Which is it?' She then shrugs.

'All of the above.' I nod, having no purport what half those things mean, but figuring out if it has anything even remotely to do with psychic abilities, then I can do it.

'Still, you're not mediumistic,' she says, as though it is the truth.

'I can see spirits.' shaking my shoulders. 'But only the ones that are still here, not the ones who've crossed;' I pause, acting to clear my windpipe, knowing it is better not to consider the bridge, School, or any of that. 'I can't see the ones who've crossed over.' I shrug, believing she does not try to push it since that is as far as I will go.

Her squints, gaze roaming from the top of my pale blond head and down to my Nike-clad feet.

A gaze that makes my complete dissertation shiver. Leading for a long-sleeved tee stashed supporting the bar and pulling it over her head where she peers at me and replies, 'Well, Regularly, if you want to act here, you're working to have to pass the hearing.'

Nevaeh, within the minds of Naddalin and with the minds, Karly Elody, Jaylynn, within her head at the time, locks the front door then leads me down a short hall and into a small room on the right.

I follow behind, hands flexed by my bottom, staring at the peace sign on the back of her tee and stressing myself that if she does anything creepy-like, I can take her down swiftly and make her regret the era she ever worked after me.

She motions approaching- a quilted foldable chair facing a small rectangle spread covered by shiny azure fabric, taking the seat just opposite me and propping her barefoot on her knee as she says, 'So, what is your specialization?'

I contemplate her, palms collapsing, focusing on taking slow deep breaths while trying not to wriggle.

'Tarot cards? Runes? I Ching? Psychometry? Which is it?'

I glimpse at the entrance, comprehending I could reach it in a fraction of a second, which strength induces a tumult, solely so what?

'You'll give me a reading, right?' levels her gaze at mine. Do you realize that is what I meant by auditioning? She laughs, displays a matching set of boils as she swings over her shoulder and laughs more.

I stare at the tablecloth, I follow the rough, rough silk with my fingers, and the heart rises to my cheek when I remember Nadalin's last words, how she can always feel me, hoping to just say that, and she cannot feel me now.

'You'll give me a reading, right?' levels her gaze at mine. Do you realize that is what I meant by auditioning? She laughs, displays a matching set of boils as she swings over her shoulder and laughs more.

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'I don't need anything,' I mutter, still unwilling to meet her sight. All I need is a quick touch of your hand, and I am fine.

Palminteri, she nods her head not as I expected, but well, leaning towards me, hands open, palms, ready to go.

I swallow hard, seeing the deeply etched lines, but that is not where the story lives-at least not for me. 'I do not read 'em,' I say, voice betraying my nervousness, as I work up the courage to touch her. 'It is more the-the energy-I just-tune into it. That is where all the info is.'

She pulls back, studying me so closely I cannot see her eyes. Knowing I need to just touch her, get it over with. And I need to do it now.

'Is it just the hand, or?' She flexes her fingers, the calluses lining her palms rising and falling again.

I clear my throat, wondering why I am so nervous, why I feel like I am betraying Naddalin when all I am trying to do is land a job that will make my aunt happy. 'No, it can be anywhere. Your ear, your nose, even your big toe-does not matter, it all reads the same. The hand's just more accessible, you know?'

'More accessible than the big toe?' She smiles, those sea-green eyes seeking mine.

I take a deep breath, thinking how coarse and rough her hands appear, especially compared to Naddalin's whose are almost softer than mine. And somehow, even just the thought of that makes the whole moment feel off. Now that our touch is forbidden, just being alone with another guy feels sordid, illicit, wrong.

I reach toward her, eyes shut tight, reminding myself it is just a job interview—that there is no reason I cannot land the thing quickly and painlessly.

Pressing my finger to the center of her palm and felt the soft, gentle give of her flesh. Allowing her stream of energy to flow through me—so peaceful, serene, it is like wading into the calmest of seas. So different from the rush of tingle and heart I have grown used to with Naddalin—at least until the shock of Naddalin's life story unfolds.

I yank my hand back as though I have been stung, fumbling for the amulet just under my top, noting the alarm on her face as I rush to explain. 'I'm sorry.' I shake my head, angry with myself for overreacting.

'Normally, I would not do that. Normally I am more discreet. I was just a little surprised—that is all. I did not expect to see anything quite so—' I stop, knowing my inane babbling is only making it worse. 'Normally, when I give readings, I hide my reactions much better than that.' I nod, forcing my gaze to meet her, knowing whatever I say will not hide the fact that I choked like the worst amateur.

'Seriously.' I smile, lips stretching in a way that cannot be convincing. 'I'm like the ultimate poker face.' Peering at her again and seeing her is not working.

'A poker face that is also full of empathy and compassion,' I stammer, unable to stop the runaway train. 'I mean, really-I'm just-full of it-' I cringe, shaking my head as I gather my things so I can stop for the day. There is no way he will hire me now.

She slides to the edge of her seat, leaning so close I struggle to breathe. 'So, tell me, 'She says, gazing like a hand on my wrist, holding me in place. 'What exactly did you see?'

I swallow hard, closing my eyes for a moment and replaying the movie I just saw in my head. The images are so clear, dancing before me, as I say, 'You're different.' I peer at her, her body unmoving, gaze steady, allowing no clues as to whether I am on track.

'But then, you have always been different. Ever since you were little you have seen them.' I swallow hard and avert my gaze, the image of her in her crib, smiling and waving at the grandmother who passed years before her birth now etched on my brain. 'And when-' I pause, not wanting to say it, but knowing that if I want the job, then I had better get to it.

'But when your father shot herself back when you were ten-you thought you were to blame. Convinced your insistence on seeing your mother, who passed just one year before, somehow sent her over the edge. It was years before you

accepted the truth that your father was just lonely, depressed, and anxious to be with your mother again. Even so, sometimes you still doubt it.'

I gaze at her, noting how she has not so much as flinched, though something in those deep green eye's hints at the truth.

Part:

I remember that I swallow hard, seeing deeply engraved lines, but this is not where the story lives, at least not for me. 'I do not read 'em,' I say, the sound of my nervous betrayal, and I work up the courage to touch it. 'It is more energy, I just tune in. This is where all the information is.'

She draws back, considering me so intimately I cannot see her sights. Knowing I need to just touch her, get it over with. Moreover, I need to do it now.

'Is it just the hand, or?' She flexes her fingers, the calluses lining her palms rising and falling again.

I clear my throat, wondering why I am so nervous.

Why?

I feel like I am betraying Naddalin when all I am trying to do is land a job that will make my relatives smile. 'No, it can be anywhere. Your ear, your nose, even your big toe-does not matter, it all indicates the equivalent. The hand's just more accessible, you understand?'

'More convenient than the big toe?' She smirks, those sea-green eyes endeavoring mine.

I take a deep breath, thinking how coarse and rough her hands appear, especially compared to Naddalin's whose are almost softer than mine. And somehow, even just the thought of that makes the whole moment feel off.

Quickly that our touch is prohibited, just being alone with a different person feels sordid, unauthorized, and beyond.

I reach toward her, eyes shut tight, reminding myself it is just a job interview-that there is no reason- I cannot land the thing quickly and painlessly. Pressing my finger to the center of her palm and felt the soft, gentle give of her flesh.

Allowing her stream of energy to flow through me- so-o peaceful, serene, it is like wading into the calmest of seas.

So-o different from the rush of tingle and heart I have grown used to with Naddalin- at least until the shock of Naddalin's life story unfolds.

-And-

I jerk my hand back as though I have been prickled, mishandling the ornament just supporting my top, regarding the dread on her profile as I speed to resolve. 'I'm melancholy.' I bounce my head, cross with personally for exaggerating. 'Frequently- I would not do such.'

Normally- I am more reserved. I was just scarcely astounded, that is all. I did not demand to see anything quite true.' I stop, recognizing my pointless babbling is only making it more serious.

'Ordinarily, meanwhile I take examinations, I protect my results much more than that.' I consent, driving my gaze to meet her, comprehending whatever I say will not hide the experience that I smothered like the worst kind of beginner.

'Solemnly.' I beam, lips stretching in a way that cannot be acceptable. 'I'm like the terminal fire-stirrer face.' Inspecting her again and seeing her is not positively operating.

'An iron face that is also full of understanding furthermore sympathy,' I hesitate, unable to obstruct the runaway train. 'I mean, really- I'm just- full of this.' I flinch, swinging my head as I reduce my stuff so I can stop for the day. There is no way he will let me know.

She slides to the edge of her seat, leaning so close I strive to breathe. 'Consequently, recognize me,' she says, gazing like a hand on my wrist, holding me in position. 'What specifically did you recognize?'

I gulp inebriating, connecting my sights for a moment, and replaying the film I just saw in my head.

The illustrations are so bright, rocking before me, as I say, 'You're different.' I scrutinize her, her body unmoving, eye steady, yielding no hints as to whether I am on track.

'Without then, you have always been collected. Eternally because you were short you have viewed them.' I gulp hard and thwart my gaze, the photograph of her in her cradle, laughing and swinging at the grandma who passed years before her birth now etched on my intellect.

'Moreover when,' I hesitate, not wanting to say it, but knowing that if I want the position, then I had better get to this.

'Exactly when your daddy shot himself back when you were ten- or even younger I do not remember- you thought you were to blame.'

Overcome your perseverance in seeing your mother, which passed just one year before, somehow sent her over the edge.

It was years before you accepted the truth that your father was just lonely, depressed, and anxious to be with your mother again. Even so, sometimes you still doubt it.'

I gaze at her, noting how she has not so much as flinched, though something in those deep green eye's hints at the truth.

She tried to visit a few times. Wanting to apologize for what she did, but even though you sensed her, you blocked it.

Sick of being teased by your classmates and scolded by the nuns-not to mention your foster dad. 'I shake my head, not wanting to continue, but knowing I must.'

'You just wanted to be normal.' Shake my shoulder. 'Treated like everyone else.' I trace my fingers over the tablecloth, throat beginning to tighten, knowing exactly how it feels too long to fit in, all the while knowing you never truly can.

'Simply after you ran away and met Lina, who is not your real grandmother-your real grandparents are dead.'

I look at her again, wondering if she is surprised that I knew that, but she gives nothing away. 'Anyway, she took you in, fed you, clothed you, she.'

'She saved my life.' She sighs, leaning back in her seat, long tanned fingers stroking at her eyes. 'In many ways. I was so lost and she.'

'Accepted you for who you really are.' I nod, seeing the whole story before me as though I am right there.

'Including who is that?' She asks hands splayed on her knees, gazing at me. 'Who am I really?'

I look at her, not even pausing when I say, 'A guy so smart you finished high school in tenth grade. A guy with such amazing mediumistic abilities has helped hundreds of people and asked extraordinarily little in exchange. Moreover yet, despite all of that, you are also a guy who's so-o.'

I look at her, lips lifting at the corners. 'Well, I was going to say lazy- but since I really do want the job, I'll say laid-back instead.'

I laugh, relieved when she laughs along with me. 'Plus given the choice you would never work another day. You would spend the rest of your eternity just searching for that one perfect wave.'

'Is that a metaphor?' she asks, with a crooked smile on her face.

'Not in your case.' Bouncing my shoulder. 'In your case, it's a fact.'

She nods, leaning back in her chair, gazing at me in a way that makes my stomach dance. Dropping forward again, feet flat on the floor when she says, 'Guilty.'

Part:

(Remembering back)

Eyes wistful, searching mine. 'And now, since there are no secrets left, since you have peered right into the core of my soul- I must ask, any insights into my future-a certain blond-haired person perhaps?'

I shift in my seat, preparing to speak when she cuts me right off.

'Plus, I am talking about the immediate future, as on Friday night. Will Emmah ever agree to go out with me?'

'Emmah?' My voice cracks as my eyes practically pop out of my head. So much for the poker face, I was bragging about.

Watching as she closes her eyes and shakes her head, those long, golden curls contrasting so nicely with her gorgeous tan skin. 'Anastasia Pappas, aka Emmah,' she says, unaware of my sigh of relief, thrilled to know it is some other horrible Emmah and not the one I know.

Turning in to the energy surrounding her name and knowing right away that it is never going to happen, at least not in the way that she thinks. 'You really want to know?'

I ask, knowing I could save her a lot of wasted effort by telling her now, but doubting her wants to hear the truth as much as she claims. 'I mean, wouldn't you rather just wait and see how it plays?' I look at her, hoping he will agree.

'Is that what you are going to say to your clients?' She asks, back to business again.

I shake my head, looking right at her. 'Hey, if they're fool enough to ask, then I'm fool enough to tell.' Smile. 'So, the question is, how big of a fool are you?'

She pauses, hesitates for so long that I worry that I took it too far. But then her smile, right hand extended as she rose from her seat. 'Fool enough to hire you. Now I know why you would not shake hands the first time around.' She nods, squeezing my hand for a few seconds too long. 'That's one of the most amazing readings I've ever had.'

'One of them?' I lift my brow in the mock offense as I reach for my bag and walk alongside her.

She laughs, heading for the door and glancing at me when she says.

'Why don't you stop by tomorrow morning, say around ten?'

I pause, knowing there is no way I can do that.

'What or what? You prefer to sleep in? Join the club.' She shrugs. 'But believe me, if I can do it, you can too.'

'It's not that.' I pause, wondering why I am so reluctant to tell her. I mean, now that I have the job, what do I care about what she thinks?

She looks at me, waiting, gaze adding up the seconds.

'It's just-I have class.' I shrug, thinking how class sounds so much older than a school like I am in college or something.

She squinted, looking at me over again. 'Where is it?'

'Um, over at Bay View,' I mumble, trying not to wince when I say it aloud.

'High school?' Her eyes narrow further, newly informed.

'Wow, you really are psychic.' I laugh, knowing I sound nervous, stupid, coming clean when I add, 'I'm finishing my junior year.'

She looks at me for a moment-too long a moment-then she turns and opens the door. 'You seem older,' she says, the words so abstract I am not sure if

they were meant for me or her. 'Stop by when you can. I will show you how to work the register and a few other things around here.'

'You want me to sell stuff? I thought I was just giving readings?'

Surprised to hear my job description expanding so quickly.

'When you are not reading, you will be working on the floor. Is that a problem?'

I shake my head as she holds the door open. 'Just-just one thing.' I bite down on my lip, unsure how to go ahead. 'Well, two things. First-do you mind if I go by a different name-you know, for the readings and stuff? I live with my aunt, and while she is cool and all, she does not exactly know about my abilities, so.'

'Be whoever you want.' She shrugs. 'No worries. But since I need to start booking appointments, who do you want to be?'

I pause, not having thought it through until now. I am wondering if I should choose Rachel after my best friend in Oregon, or something even more common like Anne or Jenny or something like that.

Disregarding knowing how mortals always expect psychics to be about as far from normal as it grows, I contemplate toward the shore and choose the third thing I see, circumventing the Tree and Basketball Court as I speak, 'Karly.' Immediately I liked the sound of it. 'You know, like the town on Catalina Island?'

She nods, following me outside as she asks, 'And the second thing?'

I turn, taking a deep breath and hoping she will listen when I say, 'You can do better than Emmah.'

Then she looks at me, gaze moving over my face, clearly resigned to the truth if not exactly thrilled to hear it from me.

And then- I remember my life and its end also, in times of the payback of paybacks, Haven's whole family of the mother and the 3 girls that looked identical like she also was given a public guillotine end to their lives it is forever in my mind and haunts my dreams even in the afterlife I remember these moments.

'You have a dangerous memoir of falling for all the wrong girls.' Jar my head like the one you are thinking of at this moment. 'You do know that true?'

I wait for an acknowledgment, some perception of what I simply answered, but she just shrugs moreover beckons me away. Still patrolling as I try for my wheels within my house and carriage, owning no opinion I can understand her when she reminisces: Do not I know this.

Nevaeh- I recall the minute I slurped into the drive Jaylynn called my cell, telling me to just go ahead and order a pizza for dinner since she must work late.

Furthermore, even though I am tempted to tell her regarding my new job, I do not.

I mean, I require to familiarize her, if for no other reason than to spare me the one she is lined up including, but there is no way I can admit to getting the job. Like she will think it is weird. Indeed, if I omit all the stuff about receiving paid to give readings (and believe me, I will never dream of considering that) she will still consult a job at a transcendental bookstore is strange. Even silly. Who do you know?

Jaylynn is far too sensible and rational to ever get following such a matter. Preferring to live in a world that is sturdy and solid... which makes absolute thought, versus the real one that... is anything but and while I hate always should prevail to her. I do not see how I have much of a choice... There is just not the way she can ever learn the trustworthiness about me, let alone that I will be giving readings under the code name of Avalynn.

I just told her I got a job somewhere local, someplace normal, like a conventional bookstore, or a Starbucks. And then of course I will have to obtain a way to back the novel up in case she decides to follow up on all that.

I park in the carport and hear up the stairs, flinging my bag onto my bed without yet watching, next heading for my closet as I flip off my top.

Presently about to unzip my jeans when Naddalin says, 'Do not mind me, I'm just sitting here enjoying the view.' I cover my chest with my arms, heart beating triple time as Naddalin lets out a low, sweet white and smiles at me.

'I did not even see you. I did not even sense you for that matter,' I say, reaching for my tee again.

'Suppose you were too preoccupied.' She smiles, hitting the space right beside her, face wrinkling with laughter when I drag on my shirt before joining her.

'What're you doing here?' I ask, not interested in the answer, only glad to be near her repeatedly.

'I figured since Jaylynn running late-'

'How'd you-' Just then I swing my head and laugh. Of course, she understands. She can read everyone's subconscious, including mine, but only when I want her to. And even though I usually leave my shield down, making my thoughts accessible for her to view, right now I just cannot. I feel like I need to explain... tell my side of the story before he can peek in my head and draw her conclusions.

'Moreover, considering you did not come by after school-' She leans toward me, eyes endeavoring mine.

'I am required to give you some time with the twins.' I draw a pillow onto my belly plus finger the seam. 'You understand, so you could get accepted to being common and-stuff-' I shrug, meeting her gaze, knowing she is not buying it, not for an instant.

'Oh, we are used to each other.' Tittering. 'I assure you of that.' She shakes her head.

'It has been quite a day, remarkably busy and remarkably interesting, for lack of a better word. However, we yearned for you.'

She beams, eyes covering over my hair, my expression, my lips, like the sweetest lingering kiss. 'It would've been extremely much more salutary if you'd been there.'

I thwart my gaze, challenging any of that is the slightest bit true. Grumbling under my inspiration when I speak, 'I bet.'

She caresses my chin, making me face her, face concealed with interest when she summons, 'Hey, what is that about?'

I urge my lips synchronically and glance away, scrunching my pillow so tight it threatens to burst, wishing I had not spoken anything because promptly I must tell.

'I'm simply' I sway my head. 'I'm just not so sure the twins would accept.' Jaring my shoulder. 'They are moderately substantial in blaming me for everything.'

-And-

Furthermore, it is not like they do not have a point. I mean.'

Simply before I can finish, I realize something-Naddalin is touching me.

Like touching me, feeling me.

For the royal.

No mitt, no telepathic embrace, simply good old-fashioned skin-on-skin contact-or at least, nearly contact.

How did you, I look at her, her eyes shining with laughter when she intercepts me peering at her bare, gloveless hand.

'You like?'

She beams, seizing my arm and lifting it high, both of us listening as the thin web of energy, the only thing separating my skin from her, quivers connecting us. 'I have been working on it all day. Nothing is going to keep me from you, Always, never- ever, nothing at all.' She nods, her gaze joining mine.

I glance at her, mind flying with hopes, of all that could mean. Experiencing the almost feel of her skin, divided only by the most delicate shroud of straight, vibrating energy, inconspicuous to everyone but us. Furthermore, while it does temper the usual haste of tingle and spirit with soul, and while it could nevermore compare to the real thing, I miss her so-o much- just being with her- I will take what I can get.

I lean into her, watching the veil expand until its stretchers from our heads to our toes. Allowing us to live together in the way that we used to or at least in the way that we used to.

'Much better.' I smile, hands roaming her face, her arms, her chest. 'Not to mention how far less embarrassing it is than the black leather glove.'

'Embarrassing?' She pulls away and looks at me, mock outrage displayed on her face.

'Come on.' Giggling.

'Yet you must admit it was a total fashion faux pas. I thought she was going to have a breakdown every time she saw it,' I whisper, inhaling her incredible, warm, musky scent as I bury my face in her neck. 'So, how would you do it?'

My lips grazed her skin, longing to taste every inch. 'How'd you harness the magic of School and bring it back here?'

'It's got nothing to do with school,' she whispers, lips at the curve of my ear.

'It is just the magic of energy. Besides, you should know by now that everything you can do there can be done here as well.'

Then at that moment, I stared at her, memorizing Ava and all the elaborate gold jewelry and designer clothes she used to manifest there, and how upset she always was when they did not survive the return trip home.

Then before I can even mention it, she responds, 'While it has true that the things manifested there cannot be transferred here, if you realize how the alchemy works, if you truly get how everything is just made up of energy, then

there is no motive you cannot manifest the same things here. Like your pick-up truck, for instance.'

'I'd hardly call it my pick-up truck,' I say, cheeks blushing even though it was not so- so long ago when she had a thing for strange cars too.

'The instant I was achieved with it I sent it right back. I mean, it is not like I grasped it.'

She smiles, concealing her hand in my hair and smoothing the ends between the tips of her fingers. 'In between manifesting things for the twins, I perfected this.'

'What kind of things?' I inquire, commanding so-so I can see her, at once delighted by the appearance of her lips, memorizing how warm and silky they once felt on mine, querying if the new energy protection will allow us to experience that repeatedly.

'It all commenced with the flat-screen TV.' She sighs. 'Or should I say flat screens since they ended up necessitating one for each of their rooms, plus another two for the den that they will share.'

-And-

'Not long after I got them all fastened up and working, they sat down to watch, and not five moments in they were inundated with representations of things they couldn't live without.'

I- Jaylynn peeped, astounded to hear that since the twins never seemed to care all that much about material things back in school, but that's because palpable things tend to lose most of their importance once you can manifest whatever you want.

I- Jaylynn suggests dropping their magic has made them just like anyone else-longing for everything just out of their grasp.

'Believe me, they're an advertiser's dream.' She smirks, shaking her head.
'Falling right into that coveted youth exchange of thirteen to thirty.'

'I remember...'

'Saving for the case that you did not truly obtain any of those things, did you?'

You just closed your eyes and made them appear. The same as going to the store and carrying it on your credit card.

'Do you even have a credit card?' Never having seen her even carry a wallet, much less a pile of plastic.

'No need.' She laughs, finger skimming the bridge of my nose before her lips meet the tip. 'But even though I did not go out and buy all those things as you so generously pointed out...' Her smile. 'That does not make those commercials any less effective, which was really my point.'

I pull away, knowing she is expecting me to laugh, or at least say something lighthearted in reply, but I cannot. And even though I hate to disappoint her, I still shake my head and say, 'Either way, you need to be careful.' I shift my body so my gaze can better meet her.

'You shouldn't spoil them so much or make them so comfortable they're reluctant to leave.' She squints at me, clearly not following my meaning, so I rush ahead to explain. 'What I mean is, you need to remember that living with you is a temporary solution. Our main goal is to look after them until we can restore their magic and get them back to School, which is where they belong.'

She rolls onto her back and stares at the ceiling. Turning her face toward mine as she says, 'About that.'

I held my breath and looked at her, my stomach dipping ever so slightly.

'I've been thinking-' Her squints. 'Who's to say School is where they belong?'

I balk, an argument pressing forth from my lips until she raises her finger and stops it right there.

'Ever, the question as to whether they return, well, don't you think that is something they should decide? I am not sure we are the ones who should be making those choices.'

'But we're not choosing,' I say, voice shrill, unsteady. 'That's what they want! Or at least that is what they said the night I found them. They were furious with me, blaming me for the loss of their magic, for stranding them here-or at least Rayne was Javion-well, Javion was just Javion.'

Shake my shoulder. 'But still. Are you saying that has changed?'

She closes her eyes for a moment, before levelling her gaze back at mine. 'I'm not sure they even know what they want at this point,' she says. 'They're a little overwhelmed, excited by the possibilities of being here, and yet too terrified to even step outside. I just think we should give them some time and space and keep our minds open to the possibility of them staying a little bit longer than planned. Or at least until they are fully adjusted, and better able to decide for themselves. Besides, I owe them, it is the least I can do. Do not forget they helped me find you.'

So-o, I swallow hard and avert my gaze, torn between wanting what is best for the twins while worried about the impact it will have on Naddalin and me. I mean, they have been here less than a day and I am already mourning my access to her, which is a selfish way to view two people in need. Still, I do not think you have to be psychic to know that with the two of them around, requiring all kinds of assistance, times like the-when it is just Naddalin and me will be severely limited.

'Is that the first time you met? In School?' I ask, seeming to remember Rayne saying something about Naddalin helping them, not the other way around.

Naddalin shakes her head, eyes on mine when he says, 'No, that was just the first time I had seen them in a long time. We go way back-all the way back to Salem.'

I look at her, jaw dropped, wondering if she was there during the trials, though she is quick to dispel that.

'It was just before the trouble started, and I was only passing through. They had gotten into some mischief and could not find their way home-so I gave them a ride in my carriage and their aunt was never the wiser.'

Part:

Laugh now.

-And-

I am about to make some crappy little comment, something about her spoiling and enabling them from the very start, when he says, 'They've suffered an extraordinarily hard life-losing everything they have ever known and loved at an incredibly young age-surely you can relate to that? I know I can.'

I sigh, feeling small, selfish, and embarrassed that I even needed to be reminded of that. Determined to stick to the practical when I say, 'But who is going to raise them?' Hoping it will seem like my concerns are far less about me and more about them. I mean, with all their unmitigated weirdness, not to mention their bizarre history, where would they go? Who could look after them?

'We're going to look after them.' Naddalin rolls onto her side and makes me face her again. 'You and I. Together. We are the only ones who can.'

I sigh, wanting to turn away, but drawn to the warmth of her all-encompassing gaze. 'I'm just not sure we're fit to be parents.' I shrug, hand moving over her shoulder, getting lost in her tangle of hair. 'Or role models, or guardians, or whatever. We are too young!' I add, thinking it is a good and valid point, and expecting about any reaction but the laughter I get.

'Too young?' She shakes her head. 'Speak for yourself! I have been around for a while, you know. Long enough to qualify as a suitable guardian for the twins. Besides.' Her smile. 'How hard can it be?'

I close my eyes and shake my head, remembering my feeble attempts to guide Riley both in human and ghost form, and how I failed miserably. And to be honest, I am just not sure I am up for it again. 'You have no idea what you're getting into,' I tell her. 'You cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to guide two headstrong, thirteen-year-old girls. It is like herding cats-completely impossible.'

'Ever,' she says, voice low, coaxing, determined to ease my concerns and chase all the dark clouds away. 'I know what is really bothering you, believe me, I do. But it is just five more years until they turn eighteen and hear off on their own, and then we will have the freedom to do whatever we want. What's five years when we have all of eternity?'

'But I shake my head again, refusing to be swayed. 'If they heard off on their own,' I say. 'If. Believe me, there are plenty of kids who stick around the house long after that.'

'Yes, but the difference is, you and I won't let them.' Her smiles, eyes practically begging me to lighten up and smile too. We will teach them all the magic they will need to gain their independence and get by on their own. Then we will send them off and wish them well and go somewhere on our own.'

And the way she smiles, the way she gazes into my eyes and smooths my hair off my face makes it impossible to stay mad, impossible to waste any more time on a topic like this when my body's so close to her.

'Five years is nothing, when you've already lived for six hundred,' she says, lips at my Cherek, my neck, my ear.

I snuggle closer, knowing he is right, even though my perspective's a little different from hers. Having never spent more than two decades in any one incarnation makes five years spent babysitting the twins seem like an eternity.

She pulls me to her, arms locked tightly around me, comforting me in a way I wish could last forever. 'Are we good?' her whimpers. 'Are we finished with this?'

I nod, pressing my body hard against her, having no need for words. The only thing I want now, the only thing that will make me feel better is the reassuring feel of her lips.

I shift my body, so it is covering her, conforming to the bend of her chest, the valley of her torso, the bulk near her hips. Hearts beating in perfect cadence, vaguely aware of the slim veil of energy pulsating between us as I lower my mouth to her-pressing and pushing and kneading together-weeks of longing rising to the surface-until all I want to do is infuse my body with her.

Her moans, a low primal sound coming from deep within, hands clutched at my waist, bringing me closer 'til there is nothing between us but two sets of clothes that need to be shredded.

I fumble at her fly as she pulls at my tee, breath meeting in short, ragged gasps as our fingers hurry as fast as they can, unable to complete their tasks quickly enough to satisfy our needs.

-And-

Just as I unbuttoned her jeans and started to slide them down, I realized we had gotten so close, the energy veil was pushed out.

'Naddalin!' I gasp, watching as she leaps from the bed, breathing so heavy and fast, her words are clipped at the end.

'Forever- I'm-' She shakes her head. 'I'm sorry-I thought it was safe-I didn't realize-'

I reach for my tee and cover myself, cheeks flushed, insides aflame, knowing he is right, we cannot take the risk-cannot afford to get caught up like that.

T'm sorry too-I think-think maybe pushed it away and-' I bow my head, allowing my hair to fall into my face, feeling small and examined, sure I am to blame.

The mattress dips as she returns to my side, the veil fully restored as she lifts my chin and makes me face her again. 'It's not your fault-II lost focus-I was so caught up in you I couldn't maintain it.'

'It is okay. Really,' I say.

'No, it is not. I am older than you-I should have more control-'She shakes her head and stares at the wall, jaw clenched, gaze far away, eyes suddenly narrowing as she turns back to me and says, 'Forever-how do we know if this is even real?'

I squinted, having no idea what she meant.

'What kind of proof do we have? How do we know Naddalin's not just playing us, having a bit of fun at our expense?'

I take a deep breath and shrug, realizing I have no proof at all. My eyes meet her as I replay the scene from that day, all the way to the end where I add my blood to the mix and make Naddalin drink, realizing the only proof I have is Naddalin's extremely unreliable word.

'Who's to say this is even legit?' Her eyes widen as an idea begins to form. 'Naddalin's a liar-we've no reason to trust her.'

'Yes, but-it is not like we can test it. I mean, what if it is not a big game, what if it is legit? We cannot take the risk-can we?'

Naddalin smiles, rising from the bed and heading for my desk where she closes her eyes and manifests a tall white candle in an elaborate gold holder, a sharp silver dagger, its blade pointy and smooth, its handle encrusted with crystals and gems, and a gold-framed mirror her sets down beside them, motioning for me to join her as she says, 'Normally I would say ladies first-but in the case-'

She takes her hand over the glass and increases the knife, putting the edge to her palm and pursuing the curve of her salvation, regarding her blood issue onto the glass, pooling, hardening, before tying her sights and inserting the rushlight aflame. The bruise is already healed by the time she passes the blade through the burning, cleansing, excusing, and before handing it to me and forcing me to do the same.

She caresses her palm over the glass and advances as I tend toward her, sniffing deeply as I quickly slice through my flesh. At first wincing at the sharp stab of pain then patrolling interested, as the ancestry pours from my palm and onto the mirror where I can see all the past selves where it slowly crawls toward her.

We stand collectively, relics still, wind rested, waiting while two ruby red smudges meet, admix, coalesce- the comprehensive epitome of our hereditary makeup joining as one-the very thing Naddalin warned us against.

Waiting for something to happen, some catastrophic punishment for what we've both done-but getting nothing- no reaction at all.

'Well, I'll be damned-' Naddalin says, eyes meeting mine. 'It is fine! Perfectly.'

Her words are cut short by the sudden spark and sizzle as our blood begins to boil, conducting so much heat a huge plume of smoke bursts from the mirror and fills up the air-crackling and spitting until the blood evaporates completely.

Leaving behind only the sheerest layer of dust on a burnt-out mirror. Specifically, what will happen to Naddalin if our DNA should meet. We gape, voiceless, hesitant about what to speak. Although words stand no great faith, the application is clear.

Naddalin's not performing. Her alarm was real. Naddalin and I can never be coincidental.

Unless like- I pay her ransom...

'Well...' Naddalin nods, struggling to appear calm though her face is stricken. 'Guess Naddalin's not the liar I accused her of- at least not in this case.'

'Which also means she has the antidote- and all I have to do now is-'

Though I cannot even finish before Naddalin's cutting me off. 'Always, please, do not even go there. Just do me a favor and stay away from Naddalin. She

is dangerous, and unstable, and I do not want you anywhere near her, okay? Just-' She shakes her head and runs her hand through her hair, not wanting me to see how distraught she is and heading for the door as she says, 'Just give me some time to figure things out. I will think of a way.'

She looks at me, so shaken by the events she is determined to keep her distance. Manifesting a single red tulip into my newly herald palm in place of a kiss, before heading down the stairs and out my front door.

The next day, when I got home from school, Haven's on my front steps, eyes smeared with mascara, royal blue bangs hanging limp in her face, with a blanketed bundle clutched tight in her arms.

'I know I should've called.' She scrambles to her feet; her face is so red and swollen as she sniffs back the tears. 'I guess I didn't really know what to do, so I came here.' She rearranges the blanket, showing me a solid black cat with amazing green eyes that appears very weak.

'Is she yours?' I glance between them, noticing how both of their auras are ragged and frayed.

'Woman.' Haven nods, fussing with the blanket and raising it back to her chest.

'I didn't know you had a cat.' I squinted, wanting to help but unsure what to do. My dad was allergic, so we always had dogs. 'Is this why you were not at school today?'

She nods, following me into the kitchen where I grab a bottle of water and pour it into a bowl.

'How long have you had her?' I ask, watching as she places the cat in her lap and brings the bowl to her face. But the cat's not the least bit interested and quickly turns away.

'Few months.' She shrugs, giving up on the water and smoothing the top of her head. 'Nobody knows. Well, outside of Josh, Austin, and the house cleaner who is sworn to secrecy, but nobody else. My mom would flip. God forbid a real living thing mess up her designer decorating scheme.' She shakes her heralds. 'Sher lives in my room, mostly under the bed. But I leave the window cracked so she can get out and wander around now and then. I mean, I know they are supposed to live longer if you keep them inside, but what kind of life is that?' Sher looks at me, her normally bright sunshiny aura turned gray with worry.

'What's her name?' I peer at the cat, keeping my voice to a whimper, trying to hide my concern. From what I can see, she is not longing for the world.

'Chrissa Marcicela.' The corners of her lips lift ever so slightly as she glances between us. 'I named her that because she is lucky—or at least it seemed that way at the time. I found her just outside my window the first time Josh and I kissed. It seemed so Mid Atlantic.' She then shrugs. 'Like a good sign. But now-' She shakes her head and looks away.

'Maybe I can help,' I say, an idea beginning to form. One I am not sure will work, but still, from what I can see I have nothing to lose.

'Sher's not exactly a kitten. She is an old lady now. The vet told me to keep her comfortable for as long as I can.

-And-

I totally would have kept her home since she likes it under my bed, but my mom's decision to redo all the bedrooms even though my dad's threatening to sell, and now the decorator is there, along with a realtor, and everyone's fighting, and the house is a mess.

-And-

Then since Josh is auditioning for the new band, and since Miles is getting ready for her performance tonight, I thought I had come here.'

She is looking at me from the side. 'Not that you were the last choice or anything.' She cringes, realizing what she just said. 'It is just that you are always so small with Naddalin and I did not want to bother you.

But if you are small, I do not have to stay. I mean, if he is coming over or something, I can just-'

'Trust me.' I lean against the counter and shake my head. 'Naddalin's-' I stare at the wall, wondering just how to phrase it. 'Naddalin's small these days. So, I doubt he will be quickly visiting anytime soon.'

I glance between here and Chrissa, reading her aura and knowing she is even more distraught than she seems. And even though I know it is not right, ethical, or whatever, even though I know it is the circle of life and you are not supposed to interfere, I cannot stand to see my friend suffer like this, not when I have a half bottle of elixir sitting inside my bag.

'I'm just sad.' Sher sighs, scratching just under Chrissa's chin. 'I mean, obviously she has lived a good long life and all, but still. Why does it have to be so sad when it ends?'

I shrug, barely listening, mind buzzing with the promise of a new idea.

'It is so weird how like one minute everything is fine-or even not so fine-but still, you are at least here. And then the next gone. Like Evangeline. Never to be seen or heard from again.'

I drum my fingers against the granite counter, knowing that is not exactly true, but unwilling to refute it.

'I guess I just do not get the point. It is like, why should you bother getting attached to anything if, A: It is never going to last, and B: It hurts like hell when it is over?' She shakes her head. 'Because if everything's finite, if everything has a definite beginning, middle, and end, then why even get started in the first place? What is the point where everything just leads to The End?'

She blows her bangs out of her eyes and looks at me. 'And I don't mean death like-' She nods toward her cat. 'Although that's where we all end up-no matter how hard we fight.'

I glance between here and Chrissa, nodding as though I am right there. Like I am just like everyone else. Waiting for my turn in a long morbid line.

'I mean death in a more metaphorical way. In a nothing lasts forever way, you know. Because it is true, nothing is built to last. Nothing. No. Things.'

'But Haven-' I start, stopping the second she shoots me a look meant to silence.

'Listen, before you try to sell me all that bright side nonsense you're just dying to spout, name one thing that doesn't end.' She narrows her gaze in a way that sets me on edge, making me wonder if she knows about me if she is trying to bait me somehow. But when I take a deep breath and look at her again, it is clear she is battling her own set of demons, not me.

'Can't do it, right?' She shakes her head. 'Unless you were going to say God, or universal love, or whatever, but that is not what I am talking about, anyway. I mean, Chrissa is dying, my parents are on the verge of divorcing, and, let us face it, Josh and I are going to end eventually too. And if it is purely an inevitable fact, then-' She shakes her head and wipes her nose. 'Well-I may as well take control of the situation and be the one who decides when. Hurt her, before she can hurt me.'

Because two things are for sure, A: It is going to end, and B: Someone's bound to get hurt. And why should that someone be me?' Sher looks away, nose runny, lips twisted. 'Mark my words, from that point on, I am a Skaufyceol Girl. Everything runs right off me, nothing can stick.'

I look at her, sensing that is not the whole story, but willing to take her at her word. 'You know what?

'You're right. You are right,' I say, seeing her look up in surprise. 'Everything is finite.' Everything but Naddalin, Naddalin, and me!

'And you are also right that you and Josh will end at some point, and not just because everything ends like you said, but because that is just the way it goes. Most high school relationships do not make it past graduation.'

'Is that how you see you and Naddalin?' She picks at Chrissa's blanket while looking at me. 'That you guys will not make it past graduate night?'

I press my lips together and avert my gaze, knowing I am the world's worst liar when I say, 'I try not to think about it too much. But what I meant was, just because something ends does not mean it is a sad thing or that someone is bound to get hurt, or that it should have never happened in the first place, or whatever. Because if each step brings us to the next, then how will we ever get anywhere, how can we ever grow if we avoid everything that might hurt us?'

She looks at me, nodding only slightly, as though she sees my point but will not fully concede.

'So-o we have no choice but to continue, to just get out there and hope for the best. And who knows, we might even learn a thing or two along the way.' I look at her, knowing I have not completely sold it, so I add, 'I guess what I am trying to say is, you cannot run away just because something will not last. You must hang in there, let it play out. It is the only way you will ever advance.' I shrug, wishing I could be a little more eloquent, but there it is.

'Think about it, if you didn't rescue your cat, if you didn't say yes when Josh asked you out-well, there's a lot of wonderful moments you would've missed.'

She looks at me, still wanting to argue, but not saying a word.

'Josh is a sweet guy, and he is crazy about you. I do not think you should throw her overboard so soon. Besides,' I say, knowing she hears me but is not truly listening, 'you shouldn't make those kinds of decisions when you're feeling so stressed.'

'How about moving, then? Is that a good enough reason?'

'Josh is moving?' I squint. I had not seen that coming.

Sher shakes her head, scratching Chrissa on the spot between her ears when she says, 'Not Josh, and Me.'

My dad keeps talking about selling the house, but damn if he discusses it with Austin or me.'

I look at her, tempted to peer inside her head and see for myself, but sticking to my earlier vow to allow my friends their privacy.

'All I know for sure is that the phrase resale value comes up all the time.'

She shakes her head, looking at me when she says, 'But you know what this really means, if any of this is true? It means I will not be going to Bay View next year. I will not graduate from my class. I will not be going to any Orange County high school for that matter.'

'I won't let this happen,' I say, gaze locked at her. 'There's no way you are leaving. You must graduate with us-'

'Well, that's genuinely nice and all.' She shrugs. 'But I am not sure you can stop it. It is a little out of your league, don't you think?'

I glance between her and her cat, knowing it is not at all out of my league.

Finding an antidote for Naddalin?

Could be. Helping my best friend stay in her zip code and save her cat?

Not much. There is plenty I can do. abundance. But still, I just look at her and say,

'We'll work something out. So never trust me, okay?

You can move in here with me and Jaylynn?' Nodding as though I mean it, even though Jaylynn would never have it.

But I still need to put something out there, provide comfort since it is not like I can voice what I am hoping to do.

'You'd do that?' She squints. 'Really?'

'Absolutely.' shook my shoulder. 'Whatever it takes.'

She swallows hard and gazes around, shaking her head when she says, 'You know I'd never take you up on it, but still, it's nice to know that even with all our rough spots you're still my best friend.'

I squinted, having always assumed it was Miles, not me.

'Well, you and Miles.' She is laughing. 'I mean, I can have two best friends-an heir and a spare, as they say?' She wipes her nose again, shaking her head when she adds, 'I bet I look like crap, right? Go ahead, tell me, I can take it.'

'You don't look like crap,' I say, wondering why she is suddenly focused on her looks. 'You look sad.'

There is- a difference... Besides, does it matter?'

'It does if you're considering whether or not you should hire me.' She shrugs. 'I have a job interview, but there is no way I can go looking like that. And it is not like I can bring Chrissa.'

I gaze at her cat, watching the life-force energy slowly slipping away, knowing I must move fast before it is too late. 'I will keep her. It is not like I am going anywhere anyway.'

She looks at me, wavering about whether she should leave her poor dying cat in my care. But I just nod, coming around to her side of the counter and lifting Chrissa out of her arms as I add, 'Seriously. Just do what you need to do, and I will babysit.' I smile, urging her to agree.

She hesitates, glancing between me and Chrissa, then rummages through her oversized bag for a small, handheld mirror, before wetting her finger and clearing the mascara tracks from her cheeks.

'I shouldn't be long.' Sher grabs a black pencil and draws a thick, smudgy line around each eye. 'An hour? Two at the most?' She looks at me, trading the pencil for blush.

'All you must do is hold her and give her some water if she wants. But she will not. She does not want much of anything now.' She coats her lips with a swipe of gloss and rearranges her bangs, before flinging her bag over her shoulder and heading for the door. Climbing into her car as she turns to me and says, 'thanks. I need the job more than you think. I need to start saving some money so I can emancipate myself like Naddalin. I am tired of the crap.'

I look at her, unsure what to say. Naddalin's situation is unique. Not at all what it seems.

'And yes, I know, I probably won't be able to support myself in quite the same style as Naddalin, but still, I'd rather live in some crappy studio somewhere

than be subject to my parents' impulsive decisions and were. Anyway, are you sure you are okay with that?'

I nod, hugging Chrissa tighter, mentally urging her to hold on, just a little bit longer, until I can help.

Haven slides her key into the ignition, the engine turning as she says, 'I promised Naddalin I would not be late. And if I hurry, I might be on time.' Checking her appearance in the rearview mirror as she shifts in reverse.

'Naddalin?' I freeze, my expression one of pure panic but unable to change it.

Sher shrugs, backing out of my drive as she calls, 'Her's the one who scored me the interview.' Waving as she disappears down the street, leaving me with a dying cat in my arms, and no words to warn her.

'You can't do it,' she says, barely having opened the door before she is already shaking her head.

'You don't even know what I'm here for.' I frown, hugging Chrissa tightly to my chest, wishing I had not come here.

'The cat is dying, and you want to know if it is okay to save it and I am telling you it is not. You cannot do it.' She shrugs, reading the situation more than my mind, which I purposely blocked so she cannot view my visit to Naddalin, which would set her on edge.

'Do you mean cannot as in not possible? Like the elixir will not work on a feline. Or cannot in the moral sense, as in do does not play God, never?'

'Does it matter?' She lifts her brow, stepping to the side and allowing me in.

'Of course, it matters,' I whimper, TV noise drifting down from upstairs, the twins' daily dose of reality shows.

She heads into the den, plopping onto the couch and patting the space right beside her. And even though I am annoyed she is acting, not even giving me a chance to explain, I still join her, rearranging the blanket, hoping one look at Chrissa will convince her.

'I just don't think you should jump to conclusions,' I say, shifting my body so I am facing her. 'It is not as simple as you think. It is not black or white, it is mostly all gray.'

She leans toward me, gazes softening as she moves her thumb back and forth under Chrissa's whiskered chin. 'I am sorry, ever. Really.' She gazes at me before pulling away. 'But even if the elixir did work—which I'm not sure it would since I've never tried it on an animal before, but even if it did—'

~*~

'Really?' I looked at her, surprised to hear that. 'You've never had a pet you could not bear to part with?' My eyes glaze over her, taking her in.

'Not one that I couldn't bear to lose, no.'

Shaking her head.

I narrow my eyes, not sure how I feel about that.

'Never, back in my day we did not keep pets in quite the same way. And after I drank the elixir, I was not interested in owning anything that might tie me down.'

I nod, catching the way she gazes at Chrissa and hoping there's room to negotiate. 'Fine. No pets. I get it,' I say. 'But do you get how someone might become so attached to their kitty they cannot bear to say good-bye?'

'Are you asking if I know about attachment?' She looks at me, gazes heavy, steady, fixed right on mine. 'About love, and the unbearable grief that comes when it is lost?'

I gaze down at my lap, feeling juvenile, foolish. I should have seen that coming.

'There's much more at stake than just saving a cat or granting eternal life-if there even is such a thing in the animal kingdom. The real question is, how will you explain it to Heaven? What will you tell her when she returns only to find the dying cat, she left in your care is now miraculously cured-maybe even becoming a kitten again, who knows? How will you explain that to her?'

I sigh, not having thought about that. Had not considered that if it does work, Chrissa would not just be healed, but physically transformed.

'It is not about it not working-I've no clue about that. And it is not about your right to play God-you and I both know I am the last one who should judge such a thing. It is more about safeguarding our secrets.'

...And while I know you have only the best intentions at heart, in the end, helping your friend will only ignite her suspicion. Raising questions that can never be answered simply or logically without revealing too much. Besides, Haven's already onto us, or something at least. So now, more than ever, it is important for us to lay low.'

I press my lips together, swallowing past the lump in my throat, hating that I have so many amazing tools at my disposal, all these magical abilities, but unable to use them, to help those whom I love.

'I'm sorry,' she says, hand hovering over my arm, hesitating to make contact until the veil comes along. 'But as sad as it seems, it really is just the natural course of events. And believe me, animals accept these things far better than people do.'

I lean into her shoulder, into her touch, amazed by her power to comfort me no matter how sad things get. 'I just feel so bad for her-her parents are always fighting-she might have to move-it is making her question the point of everything. Like I did when my world fell apart.'

'Never-ever-' her stares, gaze soft, lips looming so close, I cannot help but press mine against them-the moment cut short when the twins squeal their way down the stairs.

'Naddalin-Javion won't let me-' Rayne stops, standing before us, dark eyes wider than usual when she says, 'Omigod is that a cat?'

I glanced at Naddalin. Since when does Rayne use words like 'Omigod?'

But she just shakes her head and laughs. 'Don't get too close.' She glances between them. 'And keep your voice down. He is an extremely sick cat. I am afraid she does not have exceptionally long.'

'Then why don't you save it?' Rayne asks, prompting Javion to nod in agreement, the three of us gazing at Naddalin, our eyes wide and pleading.

'Because we do not do things like that,' she says, voice stern and parental. 'That's not how it's done.'

'But you saved Ever, and she's not nearly as cute,' Rayne says, kneeling before me 'til her face is level with Chrissa's.

'Rayne-' Naddalin starts.

But she just laughs, glancing between us when she says, 'Just joking. You know I am joking, right?'

I look at her, knowing she is not, but not willing to press it. About to get up, wanting to get Chrissa back before Haven returns when Javion kneels beside

me and places her hand on Chrissa's herald, closing her eyes as she chants a series of indecipherable words.

'No magic,' Naddalin scolds. 'Not the case.'

But Javion just sighs and sits back on her heels. 'It's not like it works anyway,' she says, still gazing at Chrissa. 'Sher looks just like Jinx at that age, doesn't she?'

'Which time?' Rayne giggles, nudging her sister as they both start to laugh.

'We may have extended her life a few times,' Javion says, cheeks pink as she glances between us, prompting me to look at Naddalin and think: See?

But she just shakes her head. Again-Haven?

'Can we get a cat?' Javion asks. 'A black kitty like that?' Tugging on her sleeve while gazing at her in a way that is hard to resist. 'They're wonderful companions and particularly good around the house. What are you saying? Can we? Please?'

'It'll help us get our magic back,' Rayne adds, nodding at her.

I look at Naddalin, reading her expression and knowing it is as good as done. Whatever the twins want, the twins get. Like- It is as simple as that.

'We'll discuss it later,' Naddalin says, trying a stern look, but the gesture's empty, everyone knows it but her.

I get up from the couch and head for the door, needing to get Chrissa back to the house before Haven returns.

'Are you upset with me?' Naddalin grasps my hand and leads me to my car.

I shake my head and smile. It is impossible to be mad at her, or at least not for exceptionally long. 'I'm not going to lie; I was hoping you'd be on my side.' I shrug, coaxing Chrissa into her carrier, before leaning against the door and pulling her close. 'But it is not like I do not get your point. I just wanted to help Haven, that is all.'

'Just be there for her.' She nods, a dark gaze at me. 'That's all she really wants from you anyway.'

She leans in to kiss me, gathering me into her arms, her hands moving over me and warming me to my core. Pulling away to gaze at me with those deep soulful eyes, the rock to my feather, my eternal partner, whose intentions are so solid and good I can only hope she never learns of my betrayal, reneging on my promise not to visit Naddalin just after saying I would not.

She cups my face between the palms of her hands and peers into my eyes. Sensing my mood shifts so easily it is as though they are her.

I avert my gaze, thinking about Haven, Naddalin, the cat, and all the mounting mistakes I cannot seem to stop making. Then clearing the thoughts and shaking my head, unwilling to visit that place when I say,

'See you tomorrow?' Barely finishing the words before she leans in to kiss me again, a slip of energy pulsating between her lips and mine.

Then holding the moment for as long as we can neither of us is willing to break away, until a twin chorus of, 'Ewe! comprehensive! Do we really have to watch that?' All trails from the window upstairs.

'Tomorrow.' Naddalin smiles, seeing me safely into my car before heading inside.

Everything started fine. As fine and normal as any other day. I woke up, showered, dressed, stopped by the kitchen to toss some cereal down the sink before chasing it with some OJ I would swishers in a glass-my usual morning routine so Jaylynn will think I ate the breakfast she made.

Nodding and smiling the whole way to school as Miles complains on and on about Holt, or France, or Holt and France, as I sit there beside her, stopping, turning, speeding, slowing, chasing yellow lights, waiting for the moment where I can see Naddalin again. Knowing the mere sight of her will turn all darkness to light, even if the effect is just temporary.

But the moment I pull into the lot the first thing I see is a mammoth-sized SUV parked right next to the space Naddalin's saving for me. And I mean mammoth, as in big and ugly. And something about the sight of Naddalin leaning against that whale of a car fills me with dread.

'What?' Miles gapes. 'You give up riding the train so you can drive a train instead?'

I climb out of my Miata, glancing between Big Ugly and Naddalin, hardly believing my ears when he starts quoting a slew of statistics about its superb safety rating and roomy back seats. I mean, I do not remember her ever once caring about the safety rating when he was chauffeuring me.

That is because you are immortal, she thinks, sensing my thoughts as we head for the gate. But may I remind you, the twins are not, and since they are now in my care, it is my job to keep them from harm.

I shake my head, gaze narrowed as I try to think of a snappy reply. My thoughts are interrupted by Haven who says, 'You're doing it again.' She crosses her arms and glances between us. 'You know, your whole, weird, pseudo telepathy thing.'

'Who even cares about that?' Miles screechers. 'Naddalin's driving a train!' She hooks her thumb over her shoulder, jabbing toward the big, black monstrosity and wincing at the sight of it.

'Is it a train or a mom's car?' Haven squints, shielding her eyes from the sun. Glancing at each of us. 'Whatever it is, one thing's for sure, it's tragically middle-aged.'

Miles nods fully warmed up to the subject now. 'First the glove and now the?' She frowns at Naddalin, disappointment clouding her face. 'I have no idea

what you are up to, but man, you are seriously losing your edge. You are not even close to the rock star you were when you first came to the school.'

I glance at her, eyes narrowed in silent agreement. But Naddalin just laughs, too concerned with the proper care and feeding of the twins to bother with what anyone thinks-including me. And while that is the way a good, responsible, parental-type figure should think, something about it bugs me.

Miles and Haven continue, teasing Naddalin about her new, surprisingly stodgy ways, as I tag along, a sliver of energy pulsating between us as she grabs my hand and thinks, what is going on? Why are you acting like this? Is it because of the cat? I thought you understood all of that.

I stare straight ahead, focused on Miles and Haven, sighing loudly as I mentally reply: It is not the cat. We settled yesterday. She is back at Haven's, marking her days. It is just-well, it is like, here I am, making myself crazy, trying to find a solution so we can be together, and all you seem to care about is manifesting HDTVs and the world's ugliest baby proof car so you can cart the twins around town! I shake my head, knowing I need to stop before I go any further and have something to regret.

'Everything's changing,' I say, not realizing I said it aloud until the words ring in my ears. 'And I am sorry if I am acting like a brat, but I am just so frustrated that we cannot be together in the way that we want.

And, like- I miss you.

I miss you so bad I cannot stand it.' I pause, eyes stinging, throat hot and tight, threatening to close completely. 'And now that the twins are living with you, and with my new job starting and all, well, it is like, we are suddenly thrust into a super stressful, middle-aged life.

And trust me, seeing your new car just now did not help.' I peek at her, thinking there is no way I am riding in that thing. Instantly ashamed when I see her looking at me with such love and compassion, I cannot help but fold.

'I was hoping the summer would be great, you know.

I was hoping we could have some fun-just the two of us.

But now it is not looking so good. And, just to top things off, did I even mention that Jaylynn is dating Milley? My history teacher? Friday night, dinner at eight!' I scowl, hardly believing the pathetic life belongs to a powerful, newly immortal, almost seventeen-year-old girl.

'You got a job?' She stops in place as her eyes search mine.

'Out of everything I just said, that is what you are focusing on?' I shake my head and pull her along, laughing despite myself.

But she just looks at me, gazes fixed on mine as she says, 'Where?' 'Mystics and Moonbeams.' I shrug, watching Miles and Haven wave as they turn down the hall and hear for class.

'Doing what?' She asks, not ready to drop it just yet.

'Retail stuff, mainly.' I gaze at her. 'You know, working the register, restocking shelves, giving readings, stuff like that.' I shrug, hoping she will not pay much notice to that last part.

Psychic readings? Her gapes, stopping just shy of our classroom.

I nod, staring longingly as my classmate's spill through the door, preferring to join them than having to finish what I started.

'Do you think that is smart? Drawing that kind of attention to yourself?'

Back to talking again now that we are alone in the hall.

'Probably not.' I shrug, knowing it is most definitely not. 'But Jaylynn insists the discipline and stability will do me some good. Or so she says. She just wants to watch me. And short of installing a babysitter cam, this is the easiest, least invasive way. She even had the horrible, soul-sucking, nine-to-five gig all set up and ready to go, so when Naddalin said he needed some help around the store, well, I did not have much choice but to-what?' I pause, seeing the look on her face, eyes guarded, hard to read.

'Naddalin?' Her eyes narrowed to where I could just barely see them. 'I thought you said someone named Lina owned the store.'

'Lina does own the store.

Naddalin's her grandson,' I say, only that is not entirely true. 'Well, she is not her real grandson, it is more like she looks after her. Helped raise her after she ran away from her last foster home-or-whatever.'

Shake my head.

The last thing I wanted was to start a conversation about Naddalin, especially with the way Naddalin's gone high alert.

'I thought it might help, you know, allow unlimited access to books and things that might help us. Besides, it is not like I am working there under my real name. I am using an alias.'

'Let me guess.' She peers into my eyes, seeing the answer displayed in my thoughts. 'Avalynn. Cute.' She smiles, but only briefly before he has gone seriously again. 'But you know how it works, right? It is not like a confession where you are shielded by a screen. People expect face-to-face contact.

They want to see you know whether they can trust you. So, what exactly are you planning to do when someone you know just happens to walk in for an impromptu tarot card reading? Did you even think about that?'

I frown, wondering why she had to take what I thought was a good deal and turn it into a problem. And I am about to deliver some snappy reply, say something like Hello? I am psychic. I will know before they even get through the door! when Naddalin appears.

Naddalin and someone else-someone vaguely familiar-someone named Marco who was last seen in a vintage Jaguar, pulling up to her house.

Walking side by side, legs moving swiftly, eyes focused on mine. Naddalin's gaze taunting, mocking, the proud owner of my dirty little secret.

Naddalin moves to shield me, gaze at Naddalin as he thinks: Stay calm. Do not do anything. I will handle it.

I peer over her shoulder, watching as Naddalin and Marco barrel toward us like an oncoming train. Gazing at me with eyes so deep, so blue, everything blurs but her moist grinning lips and flashing Ouroboros tattoo. And the last thing I think, before I am sucked in completely, is that this is my fault. If I had kept my promise to Naddalin and stayed away from her, I would not be facing her now.

Her energy swirls toward me, tugging, pulling, luring me in, sucking me into a spiral of darkness, bombarding me with images of Naddalin-the tainted antidote-my ill-advised visit-Haven-Miles-France-the twins-all of it coming so quickly, I can barely distinguish between them. But the individual images themselves are not important-it is the whole she wants me to see. All of it meant to illustrate one single thing: Naddalin's in charge now-the rest of us are just puppets, pulled by her strings.

'Morning', mates!' she sings, releasing me from her grip as my body falls limp against Nadalin.

But despite her sweet murmurings as she ushers me away from Naddalin and into the room, despite the soft reassurances intended to soothe, convinced that we have just dodged a bullet and it is over, for now, I happen to know it has only begun.

More is coming.

There is no doubt.

Naddalin's next shot is aimed solely at me.

After lunch, I heard about Mystics and Moonbeams. I am eager to start my on-the-job training, hoping it will provide a nice distraction from the mess otherwise known as my life.

It was bad enough when Naddalin kept disappearing between classes so he could check in on the twins, but by lunch, when I assured her, I was fine, that Naddalin would not bother me, and that her should just stay home, I headed for our table only to learn that Heaven has boarded the Naddalin train. Picking apart a vanilla-frosted cupcake while gushing about the big part she played in securing her job at the vintage store, despite her arriving at the interview ten minutes late.

-And-

All I could do was mumble an occasional word of dissent, which did not go over so well. So, after her third excruciatingly dramatic eye roll, after telling me to relax and unclench for the umpteenth time, I tossed my uneaten sandwich and

made for the gate. Vowing to keep an eye on her, do whatever it takes to keep them from getting together.

Just one more item on my growing to-do list.

I pull into the alley, parking in one of two spaces behind the store before heading toward the front, half expecting to find the door locked, figuring Naddalin could not resist the call of killer waves on such a beautiful day and surprised to find it wide open, with Naddalin behind the register, ringing a sale.

Part:

'Oh Henry, here's Avalynn now.' She nods. 'I was just telling Susan about our new psychic reader, and you walk in on cue.'

Susan turns, looking me over, scrutinizing, accessing, adding up all the parts in hurl herald. Sure, she is faced with the equation when she says, 'Aren't you a little-young to be giving readings?' She gives me a smug look.

I smile, an awkward slanting of lips, as my gaze darts between them, unsure how to respond, especially with the way Naddalin's looking at me.

'Being psychic is a gift,' I mumble, nearly choking on the word. Remembering a time, not long ago, when I scoffed at the thought, sure it was anything but. 'It's got nothing to do with age,' I add, watching her aura flicker and flare, knowing I have failed to convince her. 'You either have it, or you don't.' I shrug, digging myself a very deep hole.

'So, should I book you a reading?' Naddalin was smiling in a way that is hard to resist.

But not for Susan. Shaking her head and clutching her bag, she heads for the door, saying, 'You just give me a call when Lava comes back.'

The bell clangs loudly as the door closes behind her. 'Well, that went well.' I shrug, turning toward Naddalin and watching her file the receipt before adding, 'Is my age going to be a problem here?'

'Are you 16?' she asks, barely glancing at me.

I press my lips together and nod.

'Then you are old enough to work here. Susan's a psychic junkie, she will not resist for long. She will be on your sign-up sheet before you know it.'

'Psychic junkie? Is that anything like a groupie?' I follow her to the office in the back, noticing he is wearing the same trunks and peace-sign tee as before.

'Can't make a move without consulting the cards, the stars, what have you.' She nods. 'Though I'm guessing you gathered your share of regulars during all the readings you've given.' She glances over her shoulder as she opens the door, eyes narrowed, knowing, in a way I cannot miss.

'About that-' I start, figuring I may as well confess since she is on to me anyway.

But she just turns, raises her hand, and decides to stop me when she says, 'Please, no confessionals.' Smiling and shaking her head. 'If I have any hope of enjoying those huge swells out there, then I do not have the luxury of regretting my decision. Though you might want to rethink that bit about it being a gift.'

I look at her, surprised to hear her say that since all the psychics I have met, which, okay, consists of just Ava, but still, most of them think it is most certainly something you are born with.

'I'm thinking of adding some classes to the schedule, psychic development stuff, maybe even throw in some Wicca as well, and trust me, we'll get a lot more sign-ups if everyone thinks they have a fair shot.'

'But do they?' I ask, watching as she heads for an extremely messy desk and riffs through a pile of papers near the edge.

'Sure.' She nods, picking up a sheet, looking it over, then shaking her head as she swaps it for another.

'Everyone has potential; it is just a matter of developing it. With some it comes easy, they could not ignore it if they tried, with others-they must dig a little deeper to find it and you? And you? When did you know?'

She looks at me, those sea-green eyes meeting mine in a way that makes my stomach dance. I mean, one minute he is talking abstractly, thumbing through papers as though she is barely minding her words, then the next everything stops, her gaze is on mine, and it is like time has stood still.

Part:

I swallow hard, unsure what to say, part of me longing to confess, knowing he is one of the few who would understand, but the other part resists- Naddalin's the only one who knows my story, and I feel like I should keep it that way.

'Just born with it, I guess.' I lift my shoulders, cringing at the way my voice rose at the end. My eyes dart around the room, hoping to avoid the topic as well as her gaze when I add, 'So-classes. Who is teaching those?'

She shrugs, tilting her head in a way that allows her dreadlocks to fall into her face. 'Guess I will,' she says, pushing them back and revealing the scar on her brow. 'It is something I have been wanting to do for a while anyway, but Lina's always been against it. I figure I may as well take advantage of her not being here to see if it works.'

'Why's she against it?' I ask, stomach-settling when she leans back and props her feet on her desk.

'She likes to keep it simple: books, music, angel figurines, with the occasional reading thrown in. Safe. Benign. Mainstream mysticism where no one gets hurt.'

'And your way? People get hurt?' I study her, trying to pinpoint just what it is about her that sets me on edge.

'Not at all. My goal is to empower people, help them live better, more fulfilled lives, by accessing their own intuition, that is all.' She glances at me, green eyes catching me staring, making my stomach go weird again.

'And Lina does not want to empower people?' I ask, feeling all fluttery under her gaze.

'With knowledge comes power. And since power tends to be corrupt, she thinks it is too big a risk. Even though I have no plans to go anywhere near the dark arts, she is convinced they will find their way in, that the classes I teach will only lead to harder, darker stuff.'

I nod, thinking of Naddalin and Heaven and seeing Lina's point. Power in the wrong hands is indeed a dangerous thing.

'Anyway, are you interested?' She then smiles.

My eyes meet her, unsure what she means.

'In teaching a class?'

I balk, wondering if he is joking or serious, then seeing what would be neither, just putting it out there. 'Trust me, I do not know the first thing about Wicca, or-or any of it really. I've no idea how it works. I am better off just giving the occasional reading, and even trying to organize the mess.'

I gesture toward her desk, the shelves, about every available surface that is buried beneath a mound of papers and junk.

'I was hoping you'd say that.' 'Oh, and just so you know, I clocked out the moment you walked in. Gone surfing if anyone asks.'

She gets up, moving toward the surfboard leaning against the far wall.

'I do not expect you to get it completely organized or anything... it is too big a mess. But if you could get it into order, well,' she nods, looking at me.

'You just might get a gold star.'

'I'd rather have a plaque,' I say, pretending to be serious. 'You know, something nice that I can hang on the wall. Or even a statuette. Or a trophy-a trophy would be good.'

'How about your own parking space out back? I can swing that.'

'Trust me, you already have.'

'Yes, but that one will have your name on it. Reserved for you only. No one will be allowed to park in it, not even off hours. I will post a big warning that reads: CAUTION! THE SPACE RESERVED FOR AVALYNN ONLY. ALL OTHER WILL BE TOWED AWAY AT THEIR OWN EXPENSE.'

'You'd do that? For real?' I laugh, eyes meeting her.

She grabs her board, fingers gripping the edge as she heaves it under her arm. 'You get the place cleaned up and there is no limit to the rewards that await you. Today Employee of the Month, tomorrow-' She shrugs, tossing her dreads off her forehead and exposing her amazingly cute face.

Our gazes lock, and I know she is caught me again-caught me looking-wondering-thinking she is cute. So, I quickly look away, scratching at my arm, fiddling with my sleeve, anything to move past the moment toward something less awkward.

'There's a monitor in the corner there.' She nods toward the far wall, back to business again. 'That, combined with the bell on the door, should alert you to anyone coming in when you're working back here.'

'That, the bell on the door, and the fact that I'm psychic,' I say, trying to sound lighthearted, though my voice is a little shaky, having not fully recovered from the awkwardness before.

'Like the way you accessed your powers when I snuck up on you?' she asks, smiling in a nice open way, though her eyes are holding back.

'That was different.'

Shock my shoulder.

'You obviously know how to shield your energy. Most people do not.'

'And you know how to shield your aura.' Her squints, head cocked to the side, those golden dreadlocks falling halfway down her arm as she focuses on my right. 'But I'm sure we'll get to that later.'

I swallow hard, pretending not to notice how her vibrant yellow aura goes a little pink at the edges.

'Anyway, it is all self-explanatory. The files need to be alphabetized, and if you could separate them by subject, that would be great. Oh, and do not bother tagging the crystals or herbs if you are not familiar with them, I would hate to get them confused. Though if you are familiar-' Her smiles, brow raised in such a way I immediately start scratching my arm again.

I gaze at the gleaming piles of crystals, some of which I recognize from the elixirs I made and the amulet I wear at my neck, but most of which are so foreign they are not even vaguely familiar.

'Do you have a book or something?' I ask, hoping she does since I would love to learn more about their amazing abilities.

'You know, so I can'-Find a way to sleep with my immortal boyfriend someday-so I can get them all tagged properly-and-stuff.' I nod, hoping to appear like a hard worker rather than the self-motivated slacker I am.

Watching as she drops her surfboard and turns back toward her desk, shuffling through a pile of books and retrieving a small, thick, well-worn tome from the bottom of the stack.

Turning it over in her hands, and gazing at the back when he says, 'The has it all. If a crystal's not in it, it does not exist. It is also loaded with pictures so you can identify them. Anyway, it should help,' she adds, tossing it to me.

I catch it between the palms of my hands, its pages vibrating with life as the contents surge through me. The entire book is now imprinted on my brain as I smile and say, 'Believe me, it already has.'

I stare at the monitor, making sure Naddalin has left before taking the seat behind the desk and gazing at the pile of crystals. Knowing the book alone was not enough-they need to be handled to be understood.

But just as I reach for a large red rock marked by streaks of yellow, my knee knocks against the side of the desk, and my entire body grows itchy and warm a sure sign that something needs my attention.

I push the chair back and lean forward, peering under the desk, noticing how the sensation grows stronger the lower I go. Following the feeling, until I have slid off my seat and dropped to the floor, fumbling around for the source, the tips of my fingers growing unbearably hot the second I touch the bottom left drawer.

I lean back on my heels, squinting at the old brass lock-the kind of deterrent meant to keep honest people honest and dissuade those who do not know how to manipulate energy like me-closing my eyes as I ease the drawer open, only to find a pile of hanging files that are no longer hanging, an ancient calculator, and a pile of old and yellowed receipts. About to close it again when I sense the false bottom beneath.

I scoop up the papers and toss them aside before lifting the hatch and exposing an old, worn, leather-bound tome, its pages curled and fraying like a lost

ancient scroll, the words Book of Shadows inscribed on its front. I place it onto the desk before me, then sit there and stare. Wondering why someone would go to so much trouble to keep the book hidden-and from whom?

Is Lina hiding it from Naddalin?

And since there is only one way to find out, I close my eyes and press my palm to its front, planning to read it in my usual way until I am slammed by a surge of energy so intense, so frenetic, so chaotic-it practically snaps my bones.

I am hurled backward, my chair hitting the wall with such force it leaves a huge dent. The flickering remnants of random images still quivering before me and knowing full well why it was hidden-it is a book of witchcraft and spells. Divinations and incantations. Containing powers so potent it would be completely catastrophic in the wrong hands.

I steady my breath and stare at the cover, calming myself before I attempt to thumb through it. Fingers twitching, touching only the edges, as I peer at a cursive so small it is impossible to decipher.

The bulk of the pages are inscribed with all manner of symbols, reminding me of the alchemical journals Naddalin's father used to keep carefully written in code to protect the secrets within.

I flip to the middle, taking in a fine, detailed sketch of a group of people dancing under a full moon, followed by those of similar people engaged in complex

rituals. Fingers hovering above the scratchy old paper and suddenly knowing deep in my bones that there is no mistake. I was meant to find the book.

Just like Naddalin hypnotized my classmates and put them all under her spell, all I should do is weave the right incantation to convince her to divulge the information I need!

I turn the page, eager to find the right one, just as the bell on the shop door rings and I peer at the monitor to confirm it. Unwilling to budge 'til I am sure they are not going to turn right around and leave, that they are deeply committed to staying.

Watching as the small, slim, black-and-white figure makes her way through the room-nervously glancing over her shoulder as though expecting to find someone there. And just as I am hoping she will leave, she goes straight for the counter, places her hands on the glass, and waits patiently.

It Was wonderful. I get up from the desk. Just what I need-a customer. Calling, 'Can I help you?' Before I have even had a chance to turn the corner and see that it is Jewell.

The second she sees me she gasps, jaw-dropping, eyes widening, appearing almost-frightened? The two of us gape at each other, wondering how to move past the.

'Um, do you need something?' I say, voice sounding more confident than I feel, as though I am in charge around here. Taking in her long dark hair, the recent

addition of copper streaks glinting under the lights, realizing I have never seen her alone until now. Never once been confronted by her, just the two of us, without Emmah or Mireille.

My mind wanders to the book in the back, the one I left on the desk, the one I need to return to at once, hoping whatever it is that she wants can be handled quickly and easily.

'Maybe I'm in the wrong place.' She pulls her shoulders in, twisting a silver ring around and around as her cheeks spot bright pink. 'I think I-' Sher swallows hard and glances back at the door, motioning awkwardly as she says, 'I made a mistake, so I'm-I'm just going to go-'

I watch as she turns, her aura glowing a tremulous gray as she heads for the door. And even though I do not want to do it, even though I have a potentially life-changing, problem-solving book to return to, I say, 'It's not a mistake.'

She stops, shoulders hunched, looking small and diminutive without the aid of her bully friend.

'Seriously,' I add. 'You meant to come here.'

And who knows? I can help.'

Sher takes a deep breath, pausing for so long I am about to speak again when she turns. 'There's the guy.' She picks at the hem of her shorts and gazes at me.

'Naddalin.' Sensing the answer without reading her thoughts or touching her skin, just knowing the moment my eyes meet her.

'Yes, um, I guess. Anyway, I um-' She shakes her head and starts again. 'Well, I was just wondering if she was here. She gave me them.' She pulls a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket and lays it flat against the glass, smoothing the creases as she peers up at me.

'She's not here,' I mumble, eyes glazing over the flyer advertising her Psychic Development Class level 1, thinking how she wasted no time. 'You want to leave a message? Or sign up?'

I then study her carefully, never-ever having seen her so shy and uncomfortable before-with the ring twisting, eye darting, knee twitching-and knowing it is because of me.

She shrugs, gazing down at the counter as though fascinated by the jewelry inside. 'No, um, do not say anything. I will just come back some other time.' Sher takes a deep breath and pulls her shoulders back, trying to summon some of the usual revulsion reserved just for me, but failing miserably.

And even though part of me wants to soothe her, calm her, convince her there is no reason to act like the-I do not. I just watch as she leaves, making sure the door closes behind her before heading back to the book.

I do not think you ever really fall out of love with someone. I think when you fall in love, like true love, it is love for life. All the rest is just experienced and delusions.

Contented: 1

(Back to Black, and the paper)

I remember Stan recalling his story of what happened.

And Scary looking' fang, indeed? said Stan, who had been watching Naddalin read back the moments that were printed with the story of her book.

Then she- murdered thirteen people ha was added into this? said Naddalin, handing back to Stan the notebook of the draft she was writing to be published, and with one curse, history is made?

-And-

Yep, said Stan, in front of witnesses and all.

It was in broad daylight even.

Big trouble it caused said Ern darkly, didn't it, Ern? Who is Ern? She said not long after, to Stan who was looking over at her adjacently sitting also in the same booth, Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the back- better to look at Naddalin.

-And-

Besides Black encourages a big supporter of- You-Know-Oo, she- said.

Then Naddalin said, without thinking. And what about Ava? Even Stan's pupils went white- as if dark energy were in him and was being controlled by another person.

Then the train jerked back, so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside what looked like to the one side to avoid being streamered over with the darkness. Then and still on top of it with the lamp beam in front shining upon it, and then looking again the farmhouse was Nevaeh's old home and the tree was nothing more than a stump, as we made our way to yet another porthole to the other side. And as Emmah said, it feels a whole lot safer when inside a vehicle than out there.

...And you ought to be glad you are in here and not thinking you are being run over by all her past ghosts, he said- 'I knew that girl.' She was nuts!!! ...yelped Stan...

Sorry, said Naddalin hastily, but I know her too well, I even dated her, and it is not all how you make her out to be in this story that she made in her head to give all, she was in an accident mind, and traumatized by it, not mentally but next to it. And Sorry, I - I forgot -that you know everyone... and everything, as told by a book, you believe the bible too?

...And forgot- you are not a girl destines for hell, that you were just another dumb kid! Besides, he said weakly. Get the evil eyes, a girl that was becoming more than pissed.

And Joannah, my heart's going that fast... over all of this... one being over you too, two being over the rail line being all crazy, and three being over all the news of Black. He said sitting on the bench beside them both, bickering.

Part:

-And-

So-o, - so? Black was a supporter of the mother and her girls, as I wonder if we should be too?

And, Naddalin prompted apologetically, said 'I don't think so-o.'

'Oh yes,' said Stan, still rubbing his chest from getting punched, she is, and was all they said she was, and still is I feel 'a nut,' sorry to disagree with you all that love 'a crazy girl.'

'And yes, that is right, now that you feel that way? Then we are over.'

Why?

'I am the crazy girl.'

He is close to them to fainting, even realtering the idea in his mind with the look of the bloody murder of his soul.

~*~

They say... anyway when little Naddalin- got her- better of You-Know-Oo- the mother of the four girls.

'Yes, and I am one of the girls, and there were more than 4 of us too.'

And Ava's object of desire- forever, NEVER- EVER letting go of her longing for lust- and love, even if... even if she has no looks of the former girl she once was. Therefore, she called her the tower, see her the tarot card... show is a formidable force to be reckoned with, the mother then?

'Yes!'

Then - Naddalin nervously flattened her bangs down again - And All-You-Know-Oo's supporters were tracked down, weren't they, Stan?

Most of them knew it was all over, when- You-Know-'Oo went absent for both worlds, and they came silently for years. Like us, we knew she was planning and was up to no good.

But not Tirus Black.

I heard her- thought I would be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo' took over your mind, body, and soul. But no- it went down her side of the family more than his- Chiaz, somehow Emmah would have been a little niece, why she was also tinted by the evil hands of the hex of the girl's family and mother, some say that Emmah was Chiaz unborn child, a child that he never had, that only

lived for 48 hours (about 2 days), within Nevaeh, and passed, over running out of air, she was baby number two, also a hex within the family every baby that is number two passes. Yet this was never really talked about, Jaylynn death was more heart barking.

And anyway, they cornered Black in the middle of a street full of humans and Black took out his revenge on the would kill all that were in his path and blasted 'em right in the- street all apart brain splattered the roadway, and a wizard got it to see it all, that wizard was- Naddalin dad, who understood the why... of it all, know it was the hex, nothing more nothing less, it took over his mind, its little girl in pain always.

A reporter for the press said about her story after her death, in not so many words. 'Someone like Nevaeh- if they believe in the supernatural, that she was losing her wit and mind. it was said to me that she says- Ghost's- OOO-HA!' AND HIS HANDS SHOOK MUCKING HER.

Hum so maybe that unborn child was a hunt for years- that she was in the glass that leads to the other side, the mother was seeing her baby, that is it- she was never crazy- said Naddalin swiftly. Their typewriter printed out would give clues to that also, matching her story.

'Horrible, eh? And you know what Black did then? And then at that moment at that time, Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

...And What? And said Naddalin.

...And Laughead said, Stan. 'And just stood there and laughed. And' when reinforcements from the head of the Diaconate of Magic got there went with em quiet as anything, still laughing his head off.'

-And-

.... And if she- were not she- went to Dezerland, she- would be now, and said Ern in her slow voice. And I would blow Mes's fairy up before I set foot in that place. Serves her right, mind you... after what she- did...

-And-

...And She-had a job covering' it up, din' they, Ern?

.... And Stan said.

.... And 'Ole Street blew up and' all then nonmagical people died. What was it they said,' ...and, appended, Ern?

-And-

...And Gas explosion, And grunted Ernie.

...And a' now's out, and said Stan, examining her- newspaper picture of Black's gaunt face again. And never been a breakout from Dezerland before, 'as there, Ern? Beats meows did it. Frightening', eh? Mind, I Do not fancy the Dezerland guards, eh, Ern?

-And-

Ernie suddenly shivered.

...And talk about Summat else, Stan, there is a good youth. the Dezerland guards give me the collywobbles.

-And-

Stan reluctantly put the paper away, and Naddalin leaned against the window of the Knight Train, feeling worse than ever. She- could not help imagining what Stan might be telling her passengers in a few nights' time.

'Then about that Naddalin-?

Exploited her aunt!

Samir on the Knight Train did not we, Erns're was trying to run for it...

-And-

She-, Naddalin, had broken wizard law just like Tirus Black. Was inflating Aunt Marge bad enough to land her in Dezerland? Naddalin did not know anything about the wizard originally, though everyone she would ever they spoke of did so in the same fearful tone.

Dargie, who is at the school for girls' gamekeepers, had spent two months there only last year. Naddalin will not soon forget the look of terror on Bride's face she-n she- had been told there she- was going, And Darkside was one of the bravest people Naddalin knew.

The- Knight Train rolled through the darkness, scattering sarnies and wastebaskets, telephone booths and trees, And Naddalin lay, restless and miserable, on her daddy's bed.

After a while, Stan remembered that Naddalin had paid for hot Havannah collate but poured it all over Naddalin's pillow when the train moved abruptly from Anglesea to Aberdeen.

One by one, wizards and witches in dressing gowns and slippers descended from shoe-upper floors to leave the train. They all looked incredibly pleased to go.

Finally, Naddalin was her- only passenger left.

And right then, Javion, and said Stan, clapping her hands, And whereabouts in Pennsylvania?

-And-

And, then Lovett Passageway, said Naddalin.

'And right too,' said Stan. And then 'Old tight walkway was showing his sight, then- BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

She was thundering along Charing Cross Railroad Tracks. Naddalin sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing she- themselves out of the Knight Train's way, and souls following behind them.

Then- the sky was getting a little lighter. She- would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Buchanan she- moment it opened, she-n set off - there, she- did not know.

Ernie AKA Ern slammed on the brakes and she- Knight Train skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron Jinger, behind which lays the magical entrance to Lovett Passageway.

And, Thanks, And Naddalin said to Ern.

She- jumped down the steps and she-helped Stan lowers her trunk And Baby Raven's cage onto the pavement.

And, well then said Naddalin. And Bye then!

-And-

But... Stan was not paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to see- train, she was giggling at her- shadowy entrance to see- Silvanus restaurant Jinger.

...And There you are, Naddalin, and said a voice.

Before Naddalin could turn, she felt a hand on her shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, `` Joannah! Ern, come here! Come here!

-And-

Naddalin looked up at the owner of the hands-on her shoulder...

...And felt many bucketsful of ice just cascade into her and Savannah – she and her - had walked right into Jack Harlan, going into the Martita of Magic, with her swiftly.

Stan leaped onto her- pavement beside her.

And, What Dija call Javion, Martita? And she- said excitedly.

Harlan, an overweight little man in a long, pinstriped Robe, looked cold and exhausted.

And Javion? And she- repeated, frowning. And She is Naddalin.

-And-

And I knew it! And Stan shouted gleefully. And Ern! Ern! Guess Oo Javion is, Ern!" Esary-!

I can see his scar!

-And-

Arry-! I can see his scar!

-And-

~*~

Furthermore yes, then said Harlan testily,

Furthermore well, I am extremely glad she- Knight Train picked Nadalin up, but she- and I need to step inside she- Silvanus restaurant Jinger now...And

Harlan increased the pressure on Nadalin's shoulder, Including Nadalin finding her fairy being steered inside the pub. A stooping figure bearing a lantern appeared through the door behind the bar. It was Havannah, the wizened, toothless property owner.

And now there you have her, Martita!

And at once said Havannah.

And will you be wanting anything?

Like, would like Beer, Brandy, and or a pot of tea, coffee.

Moreover, said Harlan, who still had not let go of Nadalin.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind her, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Nadalin's trunk and baby raven's cage, and looking around excitedly.

Oh, how come you did not tell us you are, eh, Javion? And at once said Stan, beaming at Nadalin, while Ernie's flying horse dish face peered interestingly over Stan's shoulder.

Plus, at once a private parlor, please, Savannahian said Harlan pointedly.

Then bye, also Nadalin said miserably to Stan, likewise, Earn as Havannah beckoned Harlan toward her- a passage that led from a shoe- bar.

Likewise, I met her!

Then like flying horses are part of the dark side also there is not.

Then at that moment at that time, he said loudly, ‘she killed all of them people! ’

It was me who rescued Nadalin from Lily an' Alyssa's house after they were killed and tracked her down! Just got her out of there before everything was in dilapidations, ‘poor little thing a woman ran up and hugged her.’

‘You monster,’ she spoke looking at Stain.

At that moment with his wand that made into a folding Blade Knife with a great slash across Naddalin's forehead, he tried to kill her.

Including then he said they are all dead over you... I know who you are.

Then Tirus Black turns up, on that flying wagon they- used to ride in.

As a protection to his child daughter, ‘never occurred to me, that you still needed daddy, to fix your mess.’

‘What she- was doing there, is being a friend to you nothing more.’ Said, Black.

Black- 'I did know there have been so many lies made for you to believe, about Lily and Alyssa's all.'

'Secret-Keepers, aren't they?'

Though she had just looked at them both agonizing, without delay she-knew it was, all just a plane from day one by, 'You-Remember-Whom.'

'The mother and grandparents, that's right.' He said, holding the dagger over her had dribbled.

Looking over it all was Professor McDermott. 'Also, keep your voice down! There is no need to make a since.'

Who is attack and come to see what she could do in helping Naddain. White an' shaking', she- was.

And you understand comprehend what I did? I COMFORTED HER- as part of her soul was MURDERED.' Hypocrite! And Dargie roared.

-And-

How did I know she- was so upset about. Lily and Alyssa?

'It was power she- cared about!'

And then at that moment in that place and time she- said.

'Give Nadalin over to me, Titus Black, I'm her god daddy, I'll look after her.'

Ha!

But I had had my orders from these sisters, and I told Black no.

Duerre said to Naddalin that it was her go time she knew her mom and dad really was and all her sisters. Not just the aunt and uncles. Black argued, but in the end, he- gave in to saying he was not her true dad. Told me to take her horse to get Naddalin there.

I will not need you anymore,' she- says yelling.

-And-

I should have known there was something more to all this exceptionally suspicious going on then and now.

(Thought)

I was thinking at the thought of, 'she loved that horse, what was she-giving it up to me for?'

Contented: 2

-And-

How did I know she- was so upset about this. Lily and Alyssa and finding out her true blood?

'It was the power she cared out saying moreover making us all disabilities, likewise revolting,' she cried!'

And now you all look schizophrenic so maybe, just maybe she and they were right? Said Stain.

'They,' now who is? Naddalin, who is no other than Nevaeh herself.

And then at that juncture in that place and time she- said.

'Give Nadalin over to me, screamed Titus Black, I'm her I was always like her daddy, I'll look after her now also.'

'Ha!'

Whereas I had had my orders from these sisters you see, and I told you, Black- 'NO.'

Duerre said to Naddalin that it was her TIME TO GO, the time she knew was coming started by her mom and never any father was noted to save her life from this moment now of the time of final death and all her sisters would be her to take part in seeing the end of Nevaeh.

They are around, slowly enveloping me in this minuscule enclosure that you could call a garret.

As they whisper their evil thoughts, I could hear them all being me, and see all the visions of what was to come before they did in my head, of the far future of defeat doom, and gloom.

They thirst for death to dribble upon the very floor we stride on and deliver us the atrocity of how energy is truly is.

Not our mirror-like misconception that we could exclusively see, some only scratch the surface and though they have seen misery.

Whereas truthfully in point that they did not glimpse anything, not even a peek at what suffering could exist.

Oh, I desire so inadequately to be so immature like the considerable others who live in this undersized outlandish place I call my dwelling.

'It wouldn't humiliate me one bit to be called silly because thoughtlessness is ecstasy.'

(Wounder Naddalin.)

Whereas when has my life ever been so plenty?

The day when I was endowed with the best aptitude, I ever got in my energy was the same day I transpired to die.

Not just the aunt and uncles have the say when and where I thought. Black argued, in moments where time would stand still but, in the end, last and hold frozen.

'I gave in to communicating he was not her true dad.'

She knows, what you do not know is who she really is.

She is 'Nevaeh.' and always was.

'They all look the same no, it was easy.' Said, Black.

Told me to take her horse to get Nevaeh's there away from all of this.

I will not need you anymore,' she- says yelling.

-And-

I should have known there was something more to all this exceptionally suspicious going on then and now.

(Thought)

I was thinking at the thought of, 'she loved that horse, what was she-giving it up to me for?'

Why wouldn't she- need it anymore?

The actuality was it was too easy. Duerre knew she had been the keeper of secrets, Black knew she- was going to have to run after it that night, knew it was a matter of hours before the instrumentality was after her.

'Despite when a prestidigitator goes over the dark side like some of the sisters, there is nothing we can do.'

'And no one that matters to me anymore... Naddalin and Nevaeh are the same, under a good evil cover, that is the fight here. And despite what if, even if given more time, eh? I bet she would still be burnt alive and killed and dumped out of the magical sea remember as a fool that she is.' Said Stain.

'Just like the great-granddaughter.'

(Chatter was all around them from others.)

‘She was your friend and your girl! How can you just sell her out like this?’

-And-

A long silence followed Neaveh's story. She and Madam Esparza said with some fulfillment, and despite not managing to disappear did she been without all along, did she do this for us?

Continued:

(Time rewinds to the moments.)

The administration of Magic visited her the next day!

-And-

Alas was looking at them all. If solely we had new all along, said Harlan painfully. And it was not we who found her. It was little Nevaeh, friends trust.

This was all by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the secret keeper, and Nevaeh... that small little girl who was always labeling around after Lily at the school? Said Madam Rosmerta.

Always the same girl now as she was then stupid, now looking down from above at her all in a grouping in a row of many sets.

And then and now- worshipped Black, not like a dad but a lover, then communicated to, Professor McDermott the passion she had with all males.

And never quite in their association was being right to the world they wear part of, talent-wise she was always less. I was constantly intense with her. You can imagine how I... how I... regret that now, never saying this until now. And declared as though she had had a sudden head cold in thinking about the idea of this all.

And there, now, is Minerva, and said Harlan kindly, And Nevaeh died a hero's death as a child.

Eyewitnesses would say the same, all the township she was part of after she passed as a child, of course, we wiped her memories later- as it took time for all wonderful minds to find their place in time, told us how she cornered Black to keep her death then hidden as she made this change to one of the others.

They say she- was sobbing, 'Lily and Alyssa, and even Tirus!'

'How could you?' Tirus Black said.

And then she reached for her scepter.

Considerable sparks and wisping were made all around the room and on the well, of course,

Black was quicker to this was amateurish by all to even think or say about them.

Nevaeh was going to be remembered in this life and in the history of Earth, and always within her hometown.

Then Professor McDermott blew her nose, knowing the truth about the lingering of this mind, to say all others, and said thickly, and foolish girl, ridiculous girl, you did extraordinary things. She was always hopeless to her own mind, at dueling with pain, should have left it to all of you to make it true- Ministry.

‘And I tell yeh, if I had gotten her Black before you all think you did, I would not have messed around with wands - I would have ripped her limb off from - limb to limb and covered her in horse shit.’ Said Alyssa.

And you do not know what you are talking about, all said Black, along with saying- she can never die.

Then said Harlan sharply. Black is right, Nevaeh will linger in others, as just Naddalin or 'others' there is no stopping her from taking power over all of us.

And nobody but trained triumph sorcerers from a shoemaker like magical law enforcement crew would have stood a chance against Nevaeh once she is cornered, she is too powerful.

Harlan's voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

(One speaks up in the background.) I was Junior Martita in the department of magical catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Nevaeh with her disciples murdered all those people, for her mind thinking ill-advised in the wrath of the afterlife.

She is holding 35 lbs. box set of all her life stories on her parts on her lap and stacked beside her astray and unkempt and untidy with many note sheets hanging out of the pages of the volumes.

I - I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes think how part of me has died.

A find myself now hollow in the epicenter of my body, mind just like a street. So deep it had cracked the sewer below.

Bodies are everywhere in the graveyard where I was meant to be kept as a body. Yet my soul is lost like all the feeling of love at this place in the world I once knew.

Screaming all the screams of the dead... I see all of them in hell with me as I departed this world and made my way to limbo in the world, I made my own.

And Black standing there laughing saying you have become the God of the fallen souls.

And with what was left of Nevaeh just in front as the soul pulled away from the fallen angel body, there were the moments of them all being glimpsed stark divested.

And just like a girl lost to the muscles of rebirth in the moments of much of death seeing them all in the bloodstained robes.

And memories scattered and lost to the wind in time as remembrances
and a few fragments of the laughter of children cry. And with logic but no truth.

-And-

My mind or soul I will not need it anymore,' she- says out loudly.

And I should have known there was something equivocal going on then.

She loved everyone here unconditionally, what was given away was her
youth, her life, and she knew everything for others, even for me and you as well.

Why wouldn't she- need it anymore, her life that is she has done nothing
but devastation? Said the others.

The fact was it was too easy.

Duerre knew she had been the keeper of the secrets.

Black knew she- was going to have to run after it that night- she lost soul
and find it and move it to a glass crystal ball, and they both knew it was a matter of
hours before the Ministry was after her to end her life last life for good.

And but what if I had given in and would last now as only Naddalin and
forget the past me, eh now looking my life over now and back until this point I
have seen that was true. My past life was saved as a soul in this crystal ball, for this
moment of recalling.

And to think anyone could have taken this from me now and could have pitched it off halfway out the sea lost like a message in a bottle.

Emmah, now she is the best friend a girl can have to keep me safe! Just like Black, you are the best. Said Naddalin that night in moments of tiredness and weakness within her bed worm and yielded to say more.

But then a prestidigitator goes over the dark side, there is nothing more I can do, this is my story to come and no one that matters to me anymore... then you all, I will become your lord.

-And-

Emmah holding Naddalin walked to the room of necessities with the sound of Nevaeh lost deep in the swirling glass ball.

Then in the kiss of the glass ball, the kiss deepened, out came the life that was lost and held for a time to pass until the time of now, their fingers intertwined in Emmah's sodden light ringlets, Naddalin's trepidation began to disband. What did it matter if they were both unclothed in the room of Necessity?

The superior method that anyone could enter and discover would be to ask particularly for a jacuzzi that looked like an Enchanted Fairy Grotto. The circumstances of such a happening were vanishingly smallish.

Naddalin let herself move, her craving advancing, lips tracing a path to Emmah's neck, fingers disentangling and roaming southward as Nevaeh was remade.

Peeking onward and breezes agitated in the bubbling cauldron, and sparks of magic began to wash as the fervor grew, and the tandem started to lose themselves in one another.

Love and life were made to give a new life start.

Part:

Just moments later Ms. Ashly scowled, handing the missive from the Triwizard Commission around to the principal. Professor Klaas placed the missive down and reached into his desk.

'I presume we'll be requiring this,' he said, tugging out a bottle of Dragon Barrel brandy.

He then steeamed a snifter each for his sidekick principal and the Potions authority as well as himself.

Neither of the instructors chaperoning the principal introduced any objections. The angry deputy principal took an immense drink from her snifter before communicating.

'So,' raged Ashly. 'There is no way that we can control this all. ...Nor at least have some say as to what sorts of creatures and otherworldly obstructions are to be operated on?'

'I do not believe so,' Klaas sighed.

'It appears quite unmistakable that we have been forestalled from retaining any infusion ourselves.

We can only be grateful that the Screws bred for the task at the insistence of the sorcerer committee have been massacring each other off.

'Hopefully, their choice is few departed by the time June reaches.'

Gonzales and Ashley both snorted at the notion that Blacks needed encouragement from an outside agency to breed scary creatures.

Whereas, at the commencement of the year, the Commission had allocated Black the crystal made by breeding a life from more than one soul, knowing that Black would be all too eager to comply, despite Klaas's reticence.

'And what of the Void with complete emptiness was lasting?'

Ashly wondered aloud. 'Perhaps Black's mate Jaylynn will have some power?'

Gonzales rolled his eyes.

About the time that Ms. Ashly frowned, passing the letter from the sorcerer, and fallen angel empowerment back to the principal. Professor Klaas put the missive down and reached into his desk.

'I think we'll be requiring this,' he said, tugging out a bottle of Dragon Barrel brandy.

He then poured a snifter each for his assistant principal and the Elixirs primary as well as himself.

Neither of the professors escorting the principal extended any protests. The irate assistant principal carried a big glass from her snifter before communicating.

'Don't be so naive, it was said,' the Elixirs primary snickered. ', like if Nevaeh is so controlled, without his company to stay with them, the fallen chosen by the pastorate for the mission will not obey her order when the blood of sorcerers and fallen angels calls to them.

We must encounter facts - there are no things we can do unless the advocates cue for service.

That day there was a challenge for the youth as lasting memoirs of all the death. 'The warding talismans positioned around the Labyrinth by the committee will prevent any instructor or principal from penetrating the labyrinth unless we are presently anointed upon to furnish help.'

'But we know less than half of what the conquerors will be facing in the labyrinth,' splintered Ashley. 'Klaas, unquestionably the committee can deliver us at least a clue of what else they have in supply for the conquerors.'

The principal laughed again. 'Alas, Ms. she said, our hands are fastened.

You know as well as I do that the pastorate is in corrupt hands. The most reasonable I can do is to confirm that all the conquerors and their mentors are as knowledgeable as ourselves. I shall consult with Emmah and Jaylynn on the morrow...'

At that juncture, one of Klaas's delicate tools began to whir and oscillate remarkably, disgorging sparks and a breath of moisture. The lanterns flitted and a tiny tremor vibrated the headquarters.

Fawkes demoralized his feathers and uttered a little squawk. Snape's eyebrows drilled up in wonder.

'Good Heavens!' shouted Ashley. 'What in this world was that?'

'I do not know,' responded the principal, examining as baffled as to his staff components. He ascended out of his core fast and examined several of his contraptions, including the one which had flashed.

'There materializes to own existed some ilk of otherworldly, paranormal and supernatural power surge in the castle,' said Klaas after a juncture,

'Nevertheless, there is no sign of castle breach, nor of shady ghostly metaphysical incursion. Is anyone running an experiment at the juncture? Nunez possibly?'

'Not to my understanding,' said Ashley.

'If I may, Headmaster, conceivably we just participated the effects of an eruption of accidental charm someplace in the castle,' suggested Gonzales. 'As remarkable as it may be, on experience, teenagers can still exist given such circumstances.'

'Ha hum...' Klaas caressed his long silvery hair pensively. 'You may be onto something, Mr. Gonzales.

Such has certainly happened in history.

Nevertheless, this express outbreak must have been remarkably influential to have stunned the entire castle.'

'Bloody Hell, Emmah! What was that? What happened?' Still overwhelmed and touching foolish from their lively watery escapade, Naddalin studied at her missis expectantly. Emmah giggled nervously as the rapture of passion began to the movement of the tide out to sea.

'I... I am not sure, Naddalin, but if I had to guess, I would say it was an unanticipated avoidance of trance. I presume it is something that must transpire to illusionists periodically when they have interaction - specifically if it is reasonable and they are, truthfully in love...'

They say she- was sobbing, 'Lily and Alyssa, Tirus! How could you?'

And she-n she- went for she wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker.

And Professor McDermott blew her nose and said thickly, stupid girl... foolish girl... she- was always hopeless at dueling... should have left it up to us.

Then Naddalin slammed her- album shut, reached over, and stuffed it back into the shoe cabinet, took off her robe and glasses, and got into bed, making sure she- hangings were hiding her from view.

The- dormitory door opened.

And Naddalin? And said Jinger's voice hesitation.

But Naddalin lay still, faking to be asleep. She- she- heard Jinger leave again, and rolled over on her back, her eyes wide open.

A hatred such as she- had never known before was coursing through Naddalin like a poor girl. She- could see Black laughing at her through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over her eyes. She- watched, as though somebody was playing her a piece of film, Tirus Black blasting Nevaeh.

Emmah peered at the churning water and the crystalline stalactites of the Room of Requirement's Fairy Grotto, an idea forming in her whirring brain.

'Hmm... Well, there were two of us for one thing, strengthening the magic exponentially,' she expressed, turning negligibly pink. 'We both... erm... peaked at the identical time.

Furthermore, in the dampness - it is like when an electrical charge is introduced to saltwater. It may have manipulated the charm - further strengthened it - and emitted it into the castle walls.'

A life made into a thousand pieces sure it is going to be like a hex. She could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like in a new life within an old life) a quiet, keen murmur.

And it has occurred, hello my Goddesses my God... said Emmah. You are the world's pristine Lord, Emmah, she has made me alive, the keeper secret- for this moment was now over.

And then came another representative, chortling shrilly, then the same laugh that Naddalin had hard inside her head was passed to the soul in the ball of crystal. Two things had become one.

In obscure darkness, was the light, all around where death devours many pulling like gliding, wraithlike dark critter, widely regarded to be one of the stormiest of the dark beasts to populate the fallen angel world.

Death Devours provided magical life and pleasure and thus induced sensations of despair and discomfort in someone in nearest immediacy to them.

They could furthermore destroy a person's core, a takeaway the truth of the heart. Vamoosing their prey in an enduring vegetative state, and thus were often referred to as '*soul-pulling villains*.' And the individuals they left soulless existed believed to have been twisted into an 'empty shell'.

Death Devours is near associated with Zenon penitentiary, as they existed onetime utilized by the church of spells as the penitentiary safeguards and were not comprehended to always occupy any other establishment. Drew nearby... A Neveah was why there were made. By her evil family to take mind body and soul away from her.

And Naddalin was next as they knew the bits of soul were still lost within her of Nevaeh and her energy, you look horrendous. And Naddalin had not gotten to sleep until daybreak with them all at the foot of her bed looking deep into her eyes and hovering over her.

She- had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral staircase to a shared room, that was empty except for Jinger, who was eating a peppermint and stroking her, and Emmah how could not see anything but another type of complete darkness, who had spread her homework over three tables was lost in her disability in frustration.

'Genuinely?'

'I do not know, Naddalin. I am just inferring - I cannot be confident.'

'Freedom!' Naddalin bobbed, swallowing anxiously.

'Well, that makes as considerably sense as anything I presume - let us get out of here.'

There was a small chink of glass on the wood.

Someone had set down their glass.

And you know, Harlan, if you are eating with her- principal, we would head back up to sue- castle, and said, Professor McDermott.

One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Naddalin took the- weight of their owners once more; then robes swung into sight, and Madam Rosmerta's glittering then evaporated behind the bar. The- door or she- opened Boussiney Citadel furthermore, there was another flurry of snow, and her instructors had disappeared.

And now you need to sit down, Naddalin, said Harlan, revealing a chair by the fire.

Naddalin did not have an extremely straightforward thought of how they had contrived to get back into the Yeanworth Castle basement, though the labyrinth of the tunnel, and into the castle once more.

All she- understood was that she- yield expedition took no duration at all and that she scarcely noticed what she- was doing because her new mind and head with its new crowning halo was still pounding with the conversation she had just listened to.

Naddalin fervently expected that there had been no injury and that they could avoid getting into trouble like her sisters.

Slapdash, Natalie's Natalie dressed and fled the room of Necessity. Naddalin's incredibly thumping soul began to stall with less glowing energy when it materialized that there were no panicking flocks in the hallways of the castle, and everything appeared intact.

Though all yearnings of forgetting about the incident completely were dashed when they found themselves in the splendid vestibule at the feast. A long silence ensued in Dargie's anecdote.

Then Madam Rosmerta communicated with some satisfaction, and though they did not address to evaporate, did they? The pastorate of trance snagged up with her the following day!

They came tardily.

Seated at the mingling table already were some of their companions.

Underneath normal events, Naddalin would have been happy to see Emmah, Jaylynn, and Karly among them.

Though they emerged to be profound in dialogue regarding unusual events.

'...And me and Emmah were playing fallen angel chess by the window...' Emmah was describing Nadia and Maria.

'And I was failing as expected,' Karly added.

-And-

'...And it clattered so painfully I was sure it was going to break,' Emmah persisted.

Jaylynn rolled her eyes. 'It wasn't that challenging.'

'I didn't catch it at all,' Neville sounded in.

'Nor I,' said Karly. 'I was in my room, and I did not discern a thing.'

'Whereas I did see the lights twinkling.'

At that juncture, Emmah noticed Naddalin and Emmah taking their stools.

'Oh, hi, Naddalin, Emmah,' said Jaylynn excitedly, 'Did you feel that castle-quake?'

'Er...' said Naddalin as she blushed.

Part:

She glimpsed at Emmah, whose cheeks retained also taken on a flush glimmer.

Fortunately, Naddalin was saved from replying by the appearance of the dinner.

She lived in a deep sigh of solace and initiated to cease in.

Emmah was equally satisfied with the distraction that the meals furnished.

Becky observed Natalie's with entertainment, guessing that they had been too occupied to witness the tremor.

The darkness was stern and waterless.

A braggart swaggered in the moonlit grasslands of a plentiful Gilberto manor, its howl drilling the nighttime.

Inside the manor, a heartbreaking warlock was contemplated.

Doyle then pouted as he downed his brandy, wondering where he had gone immoral about wanting a child dead.

His narrowed eyes lit upon the unobstructed armchair close to the blaze where his missis should be sat looking at him with distrust.

Then teleporting, in a moment of a flash.

Then all the little ghost girls with black eyes are circling me as I could see the tall Slender Man, in the background, this cryptic is very massive and thin with unnaturally long, tentacle-like arms (or merely tentacles,) which he can extend to intimidate or capture prey and pull you in like all the children around him that he did already. His face is white and featureless, as the girls around him are blacker than midnight but occasionally his face seems different to anyone who sees it. He is wearing a dark suit and tie.

‘He wants my soul.’

The Slender Man is often associated with the shady woodland around us, and or abandoned homes and places, we all can teleport, and were lost in this moment like a dream. Immediacy to the Slender Man is often said to trigger a ‘Slender disorder,’ immediate commencement of paranoia, nightmares, and misconceptions accompanied by nosebleeds. I sometimes get lost in him doing this to me.

Interval: 4 The Shoe Box

Part:

Memories that you do not want to forget yet hold to the past just placed with a misheard lid on top tossed under the bed, most just have a shoebox I have many novels. Or like the time, I was for real sitting up in a tree with my boyfriend kissing outside my childhood home, as a teenager, until night fell, when the steam trains would still go by.

Then I woke up in a bed that was not my own, and blurry, it would scare you sexy. I was holding hands with a demon it was death, as a full-body apparition, with a face that was gold-like and wrinkled, eyes red as flames. He came back to me with my limp hand in his, as if we were lost long teenage lovers.

My grave has been desiccated and grave robbers have harvested my remains. Naddalin is now Nevaeh kicked off into that body become one in mid-air. The professor investigates the crystal, and she- lighting bolt zoomed higher around them all, coming from the ball itself.

Nevaeh, about to collapse under her weight looking in the group was Naddalin, thinking about the past where girls in her past lives have died by gelatin as Nevaeh just did in front of all to see, and not lived on to talk about as she did. Even headless, she was rescued, only for the moments of keeping the soul, by Jinger and Emmah, who each grabbed her under an arm as she- saved her back into the cottage.

Not today are they getting your soul, the darkness was all around them existing at least twice the nightfall feeling than normal, she was no laughing matter, she was the pristine lord of all creation. Nevaeh was the holy phantom.

The darkness allowed her fury of energy to run into the chair she fell around and slumped over, sobbing she was uncontrollably setting up, her face glazed with tears that dripped down into the tangled stream from her eyes.

(Everything when black, then a day has passed.)

Part:

A sudden sound from the corner of my room in this cabin next to the water tower, and control station for all the main lines coming into our world made Naddalin even more on edge. Jinger, and Emmah whip around as faint trails of

swarthy-looking mists. And all the manuscript that Nevaeh ever made just lying in the corner haphazardly, now looking like something that was oozing blood all over the floor, losing its supernatural strength of stamina.

She could hear the steam trains in the background linking up cars, and switching tracks, the clock was chiming the time, and not think about how harsh it was to my mind and ears, the shutter camera was sitting next to me in bed, like the newspapers, that was pushed next to me as a pillow, and the well of ink to pen my next part of my life's story. I could see the faint shape of the phonograph on the stand next to me lit softly by a candle flicker.

Clepsidra team was playing a game just outside looking out the window in the weary-looking town of Hayvannahice. Hearing in the distances, 'ascend you are and spread your wings... on my whistle... three - two - one.'

Naddalin - is flying for Coletti. According to Fathered Wings magazine, the- Nevaeh was going to be the fastest- angel in the village of Hayvannahice, for the- national teams at the year's World Championship in the games.

-And-

Likewise, Alas Valieva is now at that top spot, yet this is just a game and having a gold medal is no longer important when you are on your cessation bed. 'If only we had known we could have the games sooner,' said Harlan painfully.

And it was not you who found her to make this happen so you could fix the games so she would not when. Said, Professor Ashly.

It was little Amsel girl that did this not me- another one of these girl's friends, nonetheless.

Madison by grief is only 12, no doubt she could take this spot of world best and knowing that Black was her coach and all, and stepdad to all these children.

Likewise, had been the personal protector, proceeded after Black herself to make sure Nevaeh would never be anything in this world.

-And-

Then speedy than any other angle; she soared around the stadium and began fluttering around for the little bird Golden Snidget.

Then at that moment in time, listening all the while to play-by-play, which was being delivered by the twins' friend Becky, Emily. 'And They're off,' it was said in the background.

And the large excitement she corresponds to is the blaze behind the wings that wipe around.

And Jordan, would you manage to articulate to us what is proceeding in the tournament?

And then in a moment interrupted was Professor McDermott's voice asking about Nevaeh's healthiness. And right you are, Professor, it is just a game, said Nevaeh, now in the suffering, frail, and squeamish body of Naddalin.

Then are times of the moments in ghostly shadows next to the bed, you could see the faint figure of Nevaeh's soul not yet joined in Naddalin. Yet almost descending into the body in pulling pulsations.

And Jordan! And Okay, okay, Coletti in possession, Shauna Mueller of Coletti, heading for goal...

-And-

'Yes, first point!'

'Our lord is perishing, and all you all care about is the game outside.'

Said, Professor McDermott.

'And Emmah... that paunchy smallish girl who was consistently organizing around behind them at the school for girls, is here now to care for her?'

And said, Madam Morgan.

'And you know that she idolized Black and all that he was about,' said Professor McDermott.

McDermott- 'And never completely in their association should this girl be here now with us, skill-wise has none. I was often blunt with her, about being less ought to be one of us.'

'You can imagine how she is feeling right now, be admirable, that is not how to do it.' Said Naddalin softly.

'And now how I regret that now... even if he was a good man.' Said Emmah.

And she would- expressed as though she would- had a sudden head cold, from the powers of the others assailing her- just for speaking with no worth in the world now even her halo of bloody thorns around her head would show that she was insufficient poor of most impoverished.

'And there, now, Emmah,' Then said Harlan kindly, as he just appeared in the room, like sand, in an hourglass poring, into the physique.

These girls all died a hero's death, or they would not be here. She is no less or more than any other, just to what you all think about bloodline and camaraderie.

Eyewitnesses - would say that nonmagical people like her- Emmah, of course, has no place here even as a servant, we wiped their remembering henceforth- she was told this and this also cornered Black, being the same to the minds of the individuals in this world.

'I have been in the mind of this child screamed Naddalin, saying she is noble and good.'

(Gasps in the room.)

Part:

And you do not understand what you are lecturing about, Dargie, said Harlan sharply.

And nonentity but experienced Hit Prestidigitators from a shoe- Magic Law Enforcement Squad would maintain stood a possibility against Black once he-was cornered.

I was Junior Martita in the Department of Paranormal Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the foremost on the scene after Black massacred all those people, for his children.

That this war was not over and the famine, and the hunger that was going to come after the pandemic.

I will never bypass it. I nonetheless dream, imagine, ambition, and crave it sometimes. A recess in the epicenter of the lane, so in-depth it contained smashed the stitcher below.

Harlan's spokesperson stopped unexpectedly. There was the sound of five proboscides being blown.

And how I wish I could say that she- was strong in all of this, said Harlan, looking out the window and seeing Nevaeh's flying horses looking in at her in a soft glow as the distinctive atmosphere or quality that seems to surround and be generated by a person, thing, or place. of her soul and true core was above and no needing protection.

And her- the horse and her now experts loss unhinged her for a while in the understanding of guarding Nevaeh she was be carrying as she is in solemn snorts of exhaling, and then the shadows of night began to fall, and the lamps on the sidewalk come on, the tree leaves resealing in the breezes, a solemn feeling was in the air of an oncoming to a swarthy storm.

The murder of Lord Nevaeh and all those girls was the action of a cornered and anguished conflict- insensitive senseless.

Yet I met Black on my last examination of Dizeryland, and the remanding aftermath of the township after the uprising. All Nevaeh's truth will come out in the manuscript of texts pulled by the back wall of this bedroom.

Professor McDermott- 'Lies.' said most, that is why we are here now. 'You know, most of the profilers in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark brainwashed by the Amsel family; there is no logic in them, but I was astounded at how ordinary Black seemed even if he children with Leah, that true child is unknown or is she? Yet he calls himself the stepdad, we know now that child is in this room as Naddalin.'

She went on to say- 'This idea spoke quite rationally to me. It was exhilarating. To stress about this man being part of them is on thinkable. You would have thought he was simply bored- of the idea of them and was finding a way to unravel them underhandedly.'

'Are you finished with that paper yet?'

'She is clearly just partly finished with the newspaper of the twisted story's that were portrayed.' Said Emmah.

Then unperturbed as you please about everything that was screamed in the room about her mother Jaylynn as cold as a winter's day, doing was doing-crossword handed over the paper.

Eyes somber rolling softly and sweetly now blue and slightly gray in the dimming light, 'there is good in all of us.' said Jaylynn.

Affirmative, I was surprised at how negligible effect you have about all this, Death Devours seemed to be having on her, asking her questions in her mind always about her mother's past until the juncture of going crazy with the Hum of voices that would never be stopped.

'...And she- existed as one of them.'

'Out of fear and full mind control, out of suspicion.' She whimpered.

Then as the sky is full of Imp, and above Echidna, the monsters that were half-snake and the half-woman referred to as the 'Mother of Monsters' is showing in the sky Hale Navy is a deeply saturated navy blue that is the cast of the color above. as a wrath of the storm to come.'

Then to the cottage, with its colorful blooms around its foundations and a front gate on a picket fence create a welcoming entrance to this cottage-style home.

Sowed receptacles flank the swinging portico, supporting the consonance completed by double sets of bay windows and shutters about the front entrance. Brick pronunciations on the cottage home exterior and pathway add charming consistency and disparity.

Looking out at the hills and valleys, Adlet the creature with the upper human body and lower body of a puppy runs about the land howling at nightfall full of luminary starlight.

Just like the 'Hound of Hades run wild and free.' '...You have the Caucus Fire-Breathing Giant that at the time of twilight now takes over the belief of protecting stamina.'

Likewise, in the skies, the Garuda Human-eagle hybrid is known to be a protector of the skies. And by the lake by the cottage is Makara, the creature often characterized as a hast terrestrial animal is finding leisure.

Though what do you think she is shattered crystal ball out to do? And said Jaylynn Naztherth the daughter holding the ghost of a baby cherub that was lost in her arms. And the good gracious soul that was lost before birth.

She- is not trying to rejoin her grandmother's side and family, is she?

-And-

'I daresay that is there- eventual objective, here or not.'

And then communicated with Jaylynn evasively.

'And we hope to notice there all the same bloodline along before that we say there not.'

I must say, grandmother's side and family, are all the same here, she was independent friendless is one thing, and lost all trust is another thing... it was said when he took Naddalin in and was given her back she was the most devoted servant,

I shake to think how quickly she will rise again... now as one body mixing two souls with her sister.

-And-

So... Naddalin was still frail.

And Jinger's with Emmah's faces appeared under the plain of glass in the French doors, that opens to the hallway of her pristine bedroom.

She was both staring at her, lost for words.

Bye, Javion, who was also there to show respect! And call Stan.

And yet in all the pain and despair Stan and Emmah fell in love, just like before.

Part:

Harlan stood Naddalin along with her- within the small parlor. Just outside the little path from the door of the home looks out into the town down in

the hills of Havannah's lit by a soft lantern. All the memories of Nevaeh's photos of life are now just in a box under her bed and losing life as she is now.

Emmah clicked her fingers, a fire burst into life in the grate of the flickering luminance of flams in the fireplace, as pages of Nevaeh's tale of the past were being burnt, screaming as they take off in the dance of flams like monarch butterflies with all the timber falling, as even as all colors in the room look and turn black and white.

And they curled and the sofa just out of the bedroom and were discrediting her as she grew weaker, as she could do nothing about the loss of the memories of her life's past.

A sudden sound from the corner of Dargon's cabin as it is called constructed by Naddalin's dad, unkempt by Jinger, and Emmah slaved around the grounds around living in a watermill, down the path.

Becca one of the young vampires was lying in the corner of the dream light water mill that is attached to the cottage feasting on the flesh of a Unicorn and part of Nevaeh's body, on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

Why had nobody ever told her they were having this manuscript burning?

Emmah, Jaylynn, and Mr. Gonzales.

Mr. Harlan why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Naddalin's parents had died because their best friend had family them?

Jinger and Emmah watched Naddalin nervously all through the final dinner and ceremony of the dead of remembering Nevaeh as a whole, feasting on the blood and flesh of her body. Then her body ash and part of the soul in that body is placed in a wooden boat, set adrift, and lit on fire, to yet the other side, to the flames of heads. What is left of her is now in the body of her triplet's sister, 'this is out of love does not fear,' The cuts were made to the left pamphlet of the hand of the body.

A time of tranquility came over them all, looking over all the vampires that take part in the death ceremony.

'Not daring this moment, do we say a word, as we see this time end in our world.' Said Jinger. Talking about what they had overheard because Serafina was sitting close by them, saying in a soft mutter I have done what Emmah asked of me, in gathering the soul, and now it lingers in Naddalin. Naddalin and Nevaeh are for now the same energy, liveliness, and spirit. The glass crystal ball on the table is now opaque and dark forever, the soul and body are now gone.

Then they went downstairs to the cellar to the overcrowded common chamber in the mill, where the body of Nevaeh was viewed and all that is left is an outline of failed on a wooden gurney, it was to find Breeanna and Katy had set off half a dozen stink bombs in a fit of end-of-term high vigorousness, it everyone to clear out, and to cover the scent of death and rot.

(Soft chatter was given, between the two girls.)

Emmah pushed the texts aside and quickly found what she was looking for, the summary of the story, the leatherbound parts that she did not have, and the last file of all the texts handwritten they would be stollen under her dress for keeping in top secret to all in the cottage; with all the photographs album, of her life and past long before the making of the dark side of this world, yet was placed here in this room two years ago and forgotten.

Emmah said to Jaylynn 'the manuscript may flame, yet it is a fake, I have them all and they are safe locked in the deep chambers of the castle, hidden library.'

Which was full of illusionist pictures of her life and past ones two and her real daddy. Emmah sat down on her bed next to Naddalin, pulled the hangings shears around the bead around them, and began turning for her memory to draw in as if pulling them from the text into the mind, the pages, searching, until... they all glimmer, and become recollections to be received in her thoughts. Naddalin, who did not want anyone to know around sneaking quietly sat up to the empty bedroom, and head tilted to the side, back straight up onto the headboard, Emmah's hand is holding hers by her bedside.

Emmah sat down on her bed next to Naddalin, pulled the hangings shears around the bead around them, and began turning for her memory to draw in as if pulling them from the text into the mind, the pages, searching, until... they all glimmer, and become recollections to be received in her thoughts.

Naddalin, who did not want anyone to know around all the sneaking quietly sat up to the empty bedroom, and head tilted to the side, back straight up onto the headboard, Emmah's hand is holding hers by her bedside.

Do you not love me anymore? came the familiar voice of a child in the silence that broke it. Emmah, isn't it? My eyes opened as Naddalin, opened again, I closed them as her voice began to taunt me to remember the past.

'Of course, I love you. Or I would not be doing this, for you, and whisking my life.'

'Emmah?'

Naddalin's voice cooed to me. 'Emmah, is it not... I remember you but why should I?'

I enjoyed her more than anything. She was my friend. 'I return it back to you.'

Then at that moment, looking up, she was nowhere to be found.

I did not even comprehend where I was standing.

Floating in a vast void of white nothingness.

There was no one here, everything was in my head, as in previous times to the date I was on.

I wanted to cry. She was not there to say what happened.

She stopped on a picture of her parents' wedding day.

There was her daddy waving up at her, beaming, the bedraggled fiery brown hair Naddalin had inherited standing up in all directions.

Everything seemed to crumple, and I fell into the void around me like a vision. Alight with delight I have the feelings of, and trust arm in arm with her dad. And there... that must be her, now also me, she was real. Naddalin had never given her a thought before, over the fact of passing elementary before school age.

'Emmah.' here it goes again, all the flashbacks. 'Don't you want me; I was thinking as time when on in the memories?'

'Yes?'

'Come with me.' The voices pull bizarrely like.

Then a shrill scream broke everything back to the moment in the darkroom I was in the present.

Jumping down into my bed. The exclamation on my lips turned into a sob as his voice echoed in my head, of his death, just like my own and my sisters.

'Come with me,' it told me, as I looked into its eyes.

If she- had not known it was all the same now as it was then, she would never have guessed it was Black in the old photograph, not her dad she thinks it was.

Her face was not sunken and waxy as it was before, but now gorgeous, and her feelings full of giggles.

At this point, she had already been working with Ava for her mother and grandmother, in the orphanage, in this picture that had been taken no more than 5 years of age... she was at the time.

And there is everyone, she remembers a young child? Expressed Naddalin softly.

'Oh, Naddalin what did life have for you to do, no you know.' Articulated.

Was she- already planning the deaths at this point of us all of the- two people next to her were gone before I was? I asked myself.

Did she realize she was facing twelve years of hell from this point even if she were to live about twelve years that would make her unrecognizable, to all like the girl she was?

But the dementing did not involve her only as I thought, Naddalin considered, staring into the- pretty, laughing face of innocents.

Then, I carefully crawl out of bed so as not to wake anyone that was staying over to aid me.

Some have been sleeping in my living room since I found myself in this home.

Then looking into the memories and photographs of Nevaeh, her little body squeezed into the space I had left, Jaylynn muttered in her sleep as I passed her.

I had no intention of falling asleep again, and if I did, I would dream of Naddalin's face again, even if it were now my own, even if it were the same as my three sisters.

The blue-gray eyes looked at me like the night she nailed papa over me for the first time as all of us girls did. Mother wanted us to be a 'loving' family with a granddad with us as his new girlfriends.

For me to start over from the start, that was the best thing for me, yet it was not like I was at all in this life.

It was something I could not allow them to take away from me like in the past, the time, and the memories, and life. In such of yielded duration, I said.

'Vampires Angels?' Muttered Naddalin looking around the moonlight living room.

Not with vampires, they will try to change me, and I cannot change.

I would die as they think, Naddalin could be just like me. Said with the small voice of Nevaeh in her head.

The fear for them was so strong that I was physically sick, they were part of my grandmother's side of the conflict that had lasted all this time, in a way her army.

It stirred under my skin, it whistled through my teeth. She knew what I did. I had to return.

Part:

The moon outside was calling me like Nevaeh's voice inside my head. There has not been a full moon yet for me in my new body and new life, it will not be at least two more nights before it circles the sky where it is not covered by all the large planets. 'Arriving at me, I say hold my hands under it as if holding our moon in my hands like a glowing ball.' Tears rolled down my cheeks.

All the memories were of both asking me about something that I just could not do and doing things I would not have the power to think of doing.

Most of the diligently safeguarded in the place I was as and tragically, comfortable for the moment.

When just moments before, knowing all the death devores and dark clocked mannequins outside her bedroom door, the light of night full fall of them in making the room have a newfound blackens that lost them to the moment of not caring about them any longer as her mind develop sharper in confidences, as they could overhead is split in cracking of a hollering with fierce winds and blossom and leaves in the breeze with the colors of the Aurora even the newfound wings were

flapping and glistening, shimmering, glistening, and sparkling a soft sliver intensity that was just deemed to be proper.

Contrasting was the tress that stood dark and luminescent, all the blackbirds were swarming about overhead, as I was standing in my black lacy gown, with my hair now back as night, likewise, twisted braided over my left shoulder, and held with a string with a key, heart-shaped ring, and a crystal charm, and a lily flower at the end of it.

All these things in that moment of looking at them flashed back to those moments in time. Then fisher cracks in the ground under her feet were now growing and glistening in a robust cobalt blue, as the moon commenced to make a crescent constitution, then eclipse, marking the day in chronology.

The red-orange ashes dances in the air around them as the hills and valleys were vast, as armies of an armed man stood holding a shield, horns atop their heads, and crowns of thorns, sharp barbs from their skin, and spears and in the foreground holding, in orange light, light by smoke, and fire, and battle-axes.

Gothic skulls with candles are at their feet, past lives that do not have the next afterlife. The warrior sword the Amsel with the name depicts a blackbird on it with ruby eyes, her soul locked as a black Baird flying about the skies forever, of her triplet's sister now magically appears in her hand after now seeing over the hills the crucifixion of Lily, that understood of falling into the wrong hands of trust she

is dismantled just some of her small bones are made into a shrine at the crypt and lost to memoirs for the land cemetery of the final death.

It shows the turning of the times, and the backfire of the spirit, that is now alive within Naddalin, the might of more than one woman becoming the faithful God to their world.

Her blood dripping from her wings made the rivers red, as they were torn away from the body. Lily's lifeblood dripping from her wings made the rivers red, as they were torn away from the body, and the revelations of the conflict of control ended.

Part:

It would have been much easier to fall in and out of all the memories, thinking back to during breakfast, as a child. Then as a mother, they would not let me do it be the mother I wanted to be. If I had put the baby to bed, she would not have turned out this way. My mind was racing. I pushed her Jaylynn away. 'Reach for more than I did as a mother. To do more than I.'

The moment I did it, Kristen would push away from me too, I started crying and the twins would not understand why- did not allow their further creation unaided stand in your mind, or so I learned my true trials and tribulations.

Then going deeper in remembrance right now, my younger siblings are cooing in happiness, the last time I remember being happy with them in my mind was lost in the past time, but oh, how quickly can that change?

I remember being 7 years of age, when I woke up suddenly a second before my face was splashed with oatmeal as a child going to school. I wanted the life and memories all back.

'There are good times here.' I insisted.

The moon is already following you. She was thinking, as she was waiting for the bus.

'But...' I knew that, whereas. - I do not want to think I was already the target.

You missed school on Wednesday over the fact of the way kids were starting to be, not today.

It was Friday and the fifth day of school and already your day is nothing but misery, torment, nightmare, and much pain.

I did not tell Naddalin that she missed the third day too, yet she was dead by 2 years or so by this time.

'You walk, and you walk from the pain, I remember saying as a 7-year-old girl.'

My half-sister Alissa pouted during breakfast, her golden hair falling over her face. She looked like a sullen little pre-teenage child.

She opened her mouth when I realized that I would have to put one of the twins to bed, even if it were just like going back in time to do so.

The sound the baby made was the sound of someone holding a microphone to his lips and sounding like it was coming back to my ears from an amphitheater. The cry sounded like steam as it removed one of them right into my ear. 'Sufficiently, I did at this moment.'

She remembers when she lowered her head and filled her ears, she was still smirking.

'Hi, hi, Sh-h!'

When they joined the crib, they did not make a sound. They were known for their silent stirs. The singular moment when I entered the door to the baby's room I was swathed in a non-pricey nightdress, hair in a ponytail that bobbed as my young teenage heels communed on the wooden floor.

Looking back maybe I always looked beautiful even if I disliked everything about myself. The daughter I can see here growing before my eyes, yet in memory, and all the best friends came for her mother in their school uniform, it was more in my head than I thought.

Her wurst curls bounced up and down around her face and she was around the age of 12, that is when I still had my child.

She rushed forward into my arms every day at that stage of her life, stopping to hug me, and then walked towards her dad, who perked up, to hear everything about her school day.

Then all the photos that were under the bed were kept in a shoebox and it was like I was diving into the box itself, all coming back to me, as I could like see them, before me, as I did then all the fading memories that were taken from me.

I could not worry about that the least, it was now, and nothing that has happened yet, if that makes any sense life was going back and forth in time and age, I had time to do life over just by all these objects, photos, and keepsakes. All I could do was try. He would not have bought me this prepaid phone if he did not want me to call him. He had gone through hell for me, I could try to think I could make friends even if my sister stopped it. I would try to change history, being the now, remember the future in my keepsakes.

In the phone are all these numbers of others I knew now by after, and contacts, like 'Emmah! Emmahlyn Marilee age 14?' There it was in my life when I was a child, a thump in my mind was pounding and cursing was my mind going wild, on the other end making me smile now, what was real I did not know.

I am- Going-

Cr-a-zzz-y- crazy- CRAZ-YYYY!

My ephemeral life is sprinting beyond me- and I can support but to have hazy opinions of all the days in the history and considered of energy with my boyfriend that not proceeding to include or performing, or employment, or proms, or automobile... or the- moment of the big sweet 16.

Even babies- and that white dress! I am just walking in all the dampness, eating- whatever just to sub-stain life- and keep from shriveling up... to black dust in the hot sun- to cool 17° nights, and have homemade blankets. Everything put out of my mind gives me comfort now looking back if everything was okay.

The picture, like- I have, to the moment in time- I could form in my head was him sitting in his self-made man cave of a bedroom shaking his head or rubbing the toe he stubbed every time he got up to do something for me when his room was dark, and I would come over at night.

He could be clumsy when he wanted to be.

Then at that moment and at that very time tears started to roll, and my nose suddenly felt swollen on my face. 'Yeah, Emmah it's me-' what could I say, she needs a friend and so did I? Nothing has changed in our minds. My throat had swollen so tightly I could barely breathe; I think I had lost it. 'I'm sorry.' it came out as a squeak. 'Is that you, Nevaeh?'

'Yes!'

Emmah was brilliant and she did not deserve me when I was not there for her when I could have been. I did not deserve him either.

Chiaz patted my shoulder as he walked past me to the crib, I remember this moment. He grabbed Jaylynn and stopped immediately, for a moment to take the photo that I was holding that I was transported back in time to, whining piteously at his arms.

'Baby.'

She cooed to him in a honey tone, looking at me with irate big tot eyes. It was all a contest to see what I did right and wrong. I am too tired to worry if it is not.

Part:

'Just like her mother and sister, she has your eyes.' He said at that moment.

Then it was off, in a rip of time and place, almost transported to the next moment, I was much older now, and my companion Kristen came up to me and took my hand in hers, the letter that day. She rubbed it with her little fingers before turning to look at me with serious sapphire blue eyes.

These eyes have stood the test of time, and have been passed down, in our ancestry.

'Date night at last.' I remember saying.

'You're not sure of the dress?'

'No, I'm comfortable.'

'You look good and feel comfortable in the moment when you have seen your true legacy, your kids, and grandkids'. I hesitated. 'You look very precious, but I don't think it would be acceptable to wear this where we're going.'

'You look wonderful.'

She might look like her mother and sister, but her nose belonged only to you, just like her daddy.

Jaylynn whizzed, looking at her most youthful mother I was. Yet I ignored her, wanting my time to myself. I feel bad about it now, looking back, that I was not a better mother.

Coming home from the date night after the young 13-year-old babysitter was paid and on her way. 'Did you have a bad dream, sweetie, mm-hum, she nodded.'

Jaylynn was sucking her thumb and holding on to her teddy bear. He said to her in her bedroom it was mostly pink and softly lit in the warm glow of the fireplace in the room dancing golden flames around the hearth.

Then at that moment kissing her on the forehead, and covering her body up tightly, he gave her the teddy that I hold now in my arms tightly going back in time.

Then another voice asked from my uncovered mouth, the words I should have at the time. I turned to the tot and did everything, the same way he did.

I am dehydrated, I thank you are. 'I will try.' Kristen giggled and baby Jaylynn joined her. Nevaeh looked at her child with a look I wanted to peek. 'I got your nose.' She spoke to the youngest child.

Part:

I recall speaking these words out, 'All right, get dressed. She moved towards me. I accept being on time very seriously, that is what I always did.'

There was a boy at the door for her to go on a play date, she would not be a girl for an exceptionally long time. He was older than her, even taller.

His adorable young man figure stood against the kitchen wall. His lips tightened at what he saw.

His dark indigo eyes looked at me, like a child looking at their mother after getting into trouble.

They perceived everything, looking for changes that were not there when we last saw each other.

Little did I know at that time that this boy would change her life and mine.

'I understand.' Everything Kristen said.

We all went down the stairs and came back to us with her backpack.

When I waved to her, she came over. When she hugged me, this time she had books. On Thursday, she did not pack them at all.

'Good.' I let her go. After kissing her to have fun. She went by the name of Brandon Carol. Standing next to her, they walked to the door, I was herding them away from the car sitting in the yard.

Kristen was brilliant and she did not deserve her life being as hard as it was when I was not there for her when I could have been. I did not deserve her either or looking back on it know I was being too hard on myself.

I remember thinking hypothetically. If I left this house with you, where would you take me? For a child to play with, Kristen and I were outside, and I remember that she sat on my hip and looked at her well on the swing under the grape arbor.

'I didn't say I was going anywhere other than in the backyard,' it was the happiest she could have been for a child at that age. She should stop being so amused by things.

I remember thinking hypothetically that I could have given her more if we had had money to do so if I was a better mother. If I left this house more and would not have lived out in the middle of nowhere. Where would you take her? I asked myself, all the places that I did not go to as a child her age.

You are having a nervous breakdown. Said, Chiaz, after working doubles at the McAuley coal mines. I remember thinking, he said to me seriously when I would tell him my feelings and would pass me off.

'If you are worried about things, let me hold you to feel better... everything is going to be okay.'

Is she involved, too?

'Spirit'. He rolled his eyes and I understood. That I was overthinking everything again, instead of living in the moment.

All these summer days, even when they ended, she would think of ways she could skip school for any other reason, to be with me or him. Reminded me of myself at that age.

'Kristen was going to come home someday and all these days would be in the past. I knew yet, I wanted to hold on to them longer just like a hug longer in a moment in time frozen to keep in the heart of empathies.

Despite having to go to class she had to go on the bus, she needed friends and a boy to fall in love with. I just... wanted to spend some time with her before age took her away from me, just like time and age.'

'Then why did age come some fast like time too?'

Kristen told me.

'She would if she could stay with me forever, I don't look so surprised to think that I would have these moments back.'

What did I expect, Emmah, everyone is worried about you then now have it all back the way you should have.

Lilly and Ava and all your sisters too are so worried. 'So, are you saying this was all in my head?'

'I don't understand why they care.'

'What did I do wrong?'

Nothing out of the ordinary, 'they were not worried before, so why now?'

...I looked at him.

'What did you tell them that I was not in good health, that I had brain cancer or something like that?'

He did not even blink one of his long eyelashes in my direction, saying, 'no nothing like that.'

'Mental health, and a troubled past, and a little behind on reading.'

'Nothing,' said Emmah standing there ghostly, needed to be said, they know how hard it is for you to understand. Since you came back you can see your mind sleeping.'

He bit his lip. 'You're like a zombie- at times worse than a zombie. It is like when I first met you, you were sometimes not even in this world, lost in your psychosis.'

I was not that bad or did anything then. 'I didn't put my ring back on at that moment, even if I should have, it was too hurtful, the marriage was over,' I told

him in my defense, yet it was not sneaking in. I could not bring myself to do it because I did not know how it would be right for him if he could not comprehend my sentiments.

'This is the commencement.' He gave a little, in making me feel love at the end of the marriage, yet we were young, and it was not long after this moment he was dead, yet I did not change my feelings of feeling anything, even in the do-over. 'Now we want you to start smiling again, said Emmah who was standing there like deaths angel.'

'I'm beaming,' I whined into his neck. And I giggled. He did not make a sound.

'I will make a pact with you.

I will be back in a few minutes, and you must promise to let me into you, mind-body, and soul. And we can just spend time together like we did when we were kids, and then you can take a nap while I cook.'

I did not know he could cook at all. He not only took me with him, in all way a woman can be given to a man but also was going to cook, what I was missing nothing I had more than most my age at that point in life. 'What do you get out of it, I was thank yet?'

'A more relaxed Emmah was there for me at that moment.'

He told me he loved me and that should have been enough.

'Emmah, honey I can see you there, ghostly.' I said in my mind, and she could hear.

Jaylynn as a young child did not fib, where you are and hovel in your room mess; it is okay to play in the other room.' I groaned. If she did not look so seriously put together cute, I could not help to get angry.

Part:

'Do you promise to let me in?'

'Good.' I gave up. I was curious.

I promise to let- you back in- conceivably.

-And you doze off now.

I'll think about taking a snooze.'

She pouted. 'Close enough.'

Chiaz left and returned with ice cream and items that she loved as a child.

He then put a gallon of ice cream on the table Butter-Finger.

My lovely girl. Here is your spoon.

Then time just went by, and time moved on and years went by in a zipping flash before my eyes.

Part:

(Time slipping by)

Kristen's twins decided to move as soon as we sat down next to them. As if they both squealed when I sneezed at the same time, startling them and they both cried with their tiny blond heads screaming for their mother.

'Here.' With my finger, I put a drop of ice cream on each of them on the tongue. Then as I walked past them, I wondered why my mind, when to this but it was over the taste of ice cream. They fell silent and rolled in opposite directions.

Kristen was watching me as I turned around. When did she not look at me? 'Why sweetie do they run from me like that?'

'Shy...' She said in a reply.

'I felt bad because you looked lousy, I understand that you do not feel well.'

I shrugged. It was what it was I knew at that my health was falling. 'Now I'm just going through a phase, even if it was denial.'

'Which one, what moment do I want to hold on too?' It was survival, I was going into at this point in my life. I wanted to tell him. Instead, I held my tongue.

'There was no point in whining, just not aloud. It did not help to burden them with all my fears and worries that was what my notebooks were for.'

'You know, it's not too late.' He said, putting the spoon into the bucket.

Mine stopped right at the top.

-Too late?

'Sign up for school, in the fall coming up,' he said to Kristen. It is like we have not even spent a week together yet.

She said I am not going back to school; I am going to war.

'You are stupid, I sent you to school to get dumb.'; Her father said.

'I don't have time for school.' I could not believe she would try to do this to me again.

'Why not?'

I pointed out three reasons, one was the twins and the others behind tacks that cross us to everyone on the other side of the town. And we do not have the money to let you go to the private school.

'Reason number one and two. Reason number three is in school now.'

And reason four was expecting dinner when she got home, that I was not going to add into the idea of saying. The fifth reason whimpered softly; she did not want to go back to school. To be among people, I could relate to that notion.

Kristen- 'I don't think I'm safe when there are too many people around.' I finished abruptly. 'I'm not safe.'

'Are you okay, I feel the same way about this town.' He put my worries aside. - This is the only reason I felt safe. And I remember why this came back to my mind that night he passed in the mines.

I shook my head. 'No, I am worried about anything. I need to find a bed and lay down.' Something must have happened, if I had not, I am going to pass out. I just knew it.

I recall this day. Like the schoolchild, unfortunately, sin and womanhood are conducted by the elders when a girl is around the age of 10, cleanliness ways it at most, consequential to faith and the girl's soul, in all ways was most important parts of her young life.

I remember this day the day of the youth in the church with girls just like Kristen, and then years pasted to Jaylynn, having the girl's become women, Jaylynn undergoing the forced, clitoridectomy the surgical procedure, often performed by someone other than a trained medical professional.

The mothers and the grandmothers, with all in the town looking at the child getting it done in a church are there for the day of giving your heart to faith and becoming a woman, my grandmother did mine. It involves the partial or complete removal of a girl's clitoris.

Like the male penis, it was put there by Santan, the clitoris is a small organ found in a woman's vagina and is the dominant source of sexual pleasure in a woman's anatomy. Therefore, after experiencing clitoridectomy, most women can

no longer be active sexually during their childhood years. However, due to cultural beliefs in certain parts of the world, the procedure is a common rite of passage that marks a girl's transition into womanhood.

Commonly referred to as female genital cutting or female circumcision, clitoridectomy is usually performed for cultural or religious reasons, which may vary from culture to culture. In some areas, the surgery is thought to maintain cleanliness, while others believe removing the clitoris will prevent women from engaging in premarital sex and remove sin. Although practiced throughout the world, the procedure is most common within our township.

The strategy is often escorted by infibulation, or the stitching concurrently of the vulva. This is usually done following the removal of the clitoris, when the girls' labia majora is sewn together, leaving an opening small enough for exclusively urine and menstrual blood to pass around. Before marriage, the opening must be enlarged to allow for penetration during lovemaking, a process that can take three or more months.

Medical complications are common since the older woman in the community who completes the procedure is not medically trained but is a parent or elderly member of the community. The surgery is usually performed without anesthesia, with a razor, or with another unsterilized agent. My grandmother said, she remembered, what I thought was a needle, was this... practice clitoral unhooding and the piercing to show the marking of ownerships and giving your soul to faith.

Therefore, tetanus, hemorrhages, and tremendous scarring can also transpire. There are also long-term psychological effects, including sadness, tension, and smaller self-esteem, yet it is clean in the township and the church.

Most girls, like all of us, do not select to experience clitoridectomy, as the surgery is typically performed on girls between the ages of four and eight. These girls are usually secured by the legs by other older women or kept down during the method.

Alanna was one of the girls that we stood witness to and Jaylynn's childhood friend.

'We don't know what they'll do.' the child whizzed. You be fine, you will do fine. We spoke. 'We supposed she would come regarding understandings of metamorphosis, but she did not understand why. Weeks went by and we did not get the slightest hint from her saying anything about her novel changes.'

- This is sinful? She looked down at herself.

'YES!'

'Just think about all the friends doing the same and how big you're getting, and the honor you well have.'

'Alanna, yes, she is my friend!' Yes, she is Astute – She has clever solutions to problems based on her sharp perception.

Yes, but you are **Discerning** – She demonstrates good judgment and taste. And, **Innovative** – She applies innovative ideas to old problems to find creative solutions.

Part:

I remember her saying.

'Waiting to come back for Alanna, Afterwards and play. Similarly significant this moment was. They might have hurt her, or they were like us twins in the past, or you.' I remember these words, yet I went along with the flow, we did not even seem bothered by the idea of it all.

'They can't hurt her.' Emmah was contiguous ghostly looking at her saying, 'Lier.'

I should have never when along with this.

'It's not just you it all in the brainwashing.'

'What if she hurts Amelia or Aidaly, what if they thrash Luna or May because they say no with them crying and showing there not women yet.' She opened her mouth and closed it just as quickly when the blade went down, and nothing was said, and no gasp was given. She knew that I was right, by looking into my eyes like the mother.

'We'll get them before the Fall start of their 4th Grade year.' that was promised by the schooling, I promised myself this was the right thing to do.

Part:

That night her dad and his warm hand touched my fingers.

'Let us discover why this first, and then we'll think about it no more.'

His fingers were smooth and warm. His nails were longer than any guy would dare to wear them, a modest hint. The bottom of his fingertips was calloused, from working in high coal. Then his hands tightened, sending a warm wave of heat that swept my arm up my arm and into my stomach to my toes. It was a good feeling until she- Jaylynn raised her head.

Jaylynn- 'It was a thought I rarely allowed myself to justify this as a child.'

'Emmah?' Was the ghost of remembering for me to see the timeline move.

Her observation was worse than a stranger to us. The stranger could only watch. The warmth in my stomach turned into heat, a searing heat that licked my fingers, my head, my back, my skin. All this set my skin on fire, at the sight of everything I did wrong as a mother in this township.

When I removed my hand, it did not disappear. He burned!

'Shit.'

It escaped my mouth and I looked away.

She licked the ice cream a child would, getting my attention again doing so.

The drops got on her fingers, she licked them off.

It was too seductive in my mind.

'Are you okay?' Chiaz spoke.

I slipped my hands under my thigh before he could touch them.

He was too touchy with her too. He was too close even though it was all sin.

Distraction- I needed one of them. 'I- yes.' Why don't the words add up to my mind for all this SIN? 'I... I was thinking about calling, who...? I told him at last that night in bed, I no longer would like to be touched romantically.

At least he did not drop the spoon like Jaylynn did to the pain of her laceration.

'Why?' Became a question.

(The next morning)

'Just think... already Jaylynn you know a lot about predators and loves, as did your first cousin Naddalin.' She was also a psychic and an angel just like you.

'We all loved Naddalin for all the same things you have and done in life, but it would be wrong to drag anyone else into this, yet we all have been kids too.'

Did I not learn that if I did not anoint him to all this also, He would never forgive me, for saying it, that too was SIN.

If he knew a way to get Jaylynn away from the buzzard, vampire, wolf, demons predator fallen angel's clans he would have yet they have souls they need, I would never forgive myself. I bit my lip, now only small fiery sparks danced across my skin. 'He would like to help.'

I remember when Kristen leaned back in her chair the first day after. - Have you decided on this? 'That is, it!' You do not speak of it, anymore, 'Young Woman.'

'Not necessary to do this,' she cried.'

She whimpered, her face turning pink.

The first sign of an approaching serious attack.

Sensitive, isn't it? She hiccupped.

-You'll have to tighten up. Thus, we are going to leave you whimpering in the corner like the child you are growing up.

Kristen- When I lowered it in the bath, the tension subsided. It cracked and reverberated.

All just stories and memories for the Shoe Box.

Nevaeh you are, **Courageous** – She fights for what she believes in, no matter the cost. Emmah said.

'He adores you.' Kristen did not look pleased with this. He was so restless nonetheless even so.

'He tolerates me.' I sigh. 'He adores you as a mother, you need to remember that.'

Kristen laughed.

It made me happy, I adored her laugh.

That is why I put up with it for so long.

And my past? He asked, leaning forward, I leaned away. How did she treat you? Like you needed help, and shit. You are doing better than she did with you.

'I'm not a family associate, I'm not safe, but I'm safe enough to keep the twins around me, anymore either, and to be around her kids.'

I rarely saw them growing up, to be honest my mother was truly Hope more than my real mother.

Once a day, at most, she worked in two shifts in the hospital and dragged me there with her and that is when I found a home, I remember that too it was a home, nonetheless. Smells like Dove, shit to me. You are too kind to them. He spoke.

That is what she told me, it was a place to lay my head, and I long ago retracted one time say to what she and told me or get punished.

She does not mind if you are half... was lying or not, or even bathed.

'Not really.' I shrugged; it was a home my true first.

'She hasn't attacked me or kicked me out for being me, so I don't think she did not really care about me anymore looking back.'

'Maybe it was all me, and my f*cked up head.'

- It is good. My grandkids were worried about you and her. Kristen confessed.

'At least you will not have to worry about one of us attacking you.' I growled to Kristen.

'We want you to stay with us and your mom too, as long as you like.'

Was it all so?

'Not?'

Part:

(Then my mind drifted- to telling her my memories.)

'Mom likes you, she thinks you're nice and sweet and that I like you just the way you are.'

Good girl.

Kristen- my stepdad Ramiz Kharitonova, was there in the room we were all family, he did it mentally, like we were in a relationship.

We were not even though he kissed me- two times, okay, three times. I wanted him to kiss me again, but I did not dare let him know. '... I reached to expect that this goodnight I treasured so considerably would carry standing as delinquent as attainable, to lengthen the span of slumber ...'

'It appeared to me that with an impious and private hand I kept just drafted in his heart a rather crumple and drove a first dark hair to materialize.'

'I accomplished not take my gazes off my stepdad, I understood that when we existed at the table, they would not let me dwell during the fundamental dinner and that, in directive not to irritate my mother, daddy would not let me kiss him several times in front of the guests, as though we existed in my space.

So, I pledged myself that in the dining room, as they were forming spread and I touched the hour happened.

I would do everything I could do independently in advancement of this kiss which would be so temporary and underhanded, select my eyes the location on his cheek that I would kiss, schedule my reflections to be competent, by standards of this cognitive conception of the kiss, to dedicate the entirety of the minute dad would bless me to handle her cheek against my lips ...'

I have no idea where I stand with my stepdad.

He never told me, although a week ago I woke up in his bed and slept in his shirt.

He thought he killed me when he tried to save me from my vampire father.

He told me that I was in his bed because he could not stand me being anywhere else. What does it mean I was a juvenile?

'Let us be appreciative to the somebody who completes us pleased; they are the adorable gardeners who create our hearts flower.'

'The actual pilgrimage of finding consists not in pursuing new terrains with each other, but in delivering new gazes to the soul within the locking of eyes.'

'Love is not ineffective because it is frustrating, but over it is provided. The individual we love depends on ashes when we possess them.'

'The longing for something additional than what we keep and to convey something unknown, actually if it is more harmful, some sentiment, some heartache, and when our sensibility, which satisfaction has softened like a nonfunctioning interment playing the twines, like one who enjoys resounding to the underneath story lines of some writing, actually an unpolished one, and actually if its strength be harmed by it if changed.'

'And since I worshiped him, I could exclusively ever glimpse him via the disorganized passion for better of him, which when you are with the someone you treasure denies you of the sense of treasuring.'

It would be so easy to believe it was not love to me, but I was not a multitude. You cannot protect what you do not need to protect.

'I don't think I can live with you; I remember saying to him as the mouths when by.' Then at that moment I was shaking my head, I remembered waking in the dark with warm air blowing around my neck.

I shook off the memory of me rolling over and burying my face in his chest—damn it! Of when innocent love became more.

Why couldn't I get that memory out of my head? If I did not dream of running away like a wolf-like he was underneath those soft eyes if I did not dream of finding him in that darkness, I dreamed of him loving me more, even if it was wrong! Why me?

'Emmah the 'White Angel' with her melancholy, and somber look to us, was giving us both in away- the remember of are past and childhoods, to comprehend.'

-Then-

I recall- 'Feel free to pack if you ever feel like it, and never look back I remember saying to myself.

'Mom tells me that every other day that I can do just that.' She said solemnly.

'Gram tells me to stay the days she doesn't want me around her man.'

And he told me when they both said nothing, that I was lying.

'I won't say anything.' It was not always easy to smile now I can look back with you now, at the past.

'Okay, now I have an inquiry.'

— I may have an answer. She squinted his eyes at me.

I remembered the time when he dropped his spoon and turned towards me on the stool saying I will see you tonight. Mom most of the time was drunk and passed out, to him drugging her.

You... - You will not get down on one knee for me as you did her, will you? I teased. His face went completely blank. Tilting his head to the side, as if he had to think about it. I hope it got out of his head.

'I did not mean to... Mom would kill me if I did not at least buy you a ring first...' He paused. 'I do not mind, we could take the plunge, have a little ceremony, family of friends, winter, or late fall? I like it...'

I could not bear it. My spoon went up in the air and the ice cream hit him right in the nose. Bad hand!

Being bad was fun and I could not stop giggling as he wiped it off the tip of his nose. 'Stop talking.' I ordered. 'Now that you've finished thinking about the nonsense, we can try it again.'

He remained silent, even glancing over his shoulder at the door. No one entered, he turned his attention back to me.

- I will be right back now. He did not answer me, just watched me walk out of the kitchen.

I did not care, I had to leave. Closing the bathroom door, I slid to the floor.

What? Hello. I was Incorrectly thinking about doing this for real. With the participation, to me!

A whistle escaped from my teeth, and I understood. She wanted to know what I was thinking and wanted more control to ask him about what he was going to ask me if I said yes. 'No.' She could not get it, the way I did. Another howl.

'I had to put that damn ring back on... even in that moment of looking back on life.'

A sharp, hot pain pierced my stomach, digging into my skin with its jagged blades. When my hands took off to stop them, there was nothing there. Nothing, not a thing. Phantom pains.

She whimpered again, saying 'think child,' we both remembered how much silver hurt. Deep down, I did not want to return to silver. If I could maintain control, it would not be necessary. 'Calm down.'

Now I was sitting in the bathroom talking to myself.

Looking right at her, Emmah looking deep in my eyes!

I have never listened to Emmah who had to talk to their other half of me also about all of this.

Then who did I ask about that, the same girl I was dumb founded?

I did not know she was not fooling me or tricking me in some way, yet I remember my past to determinate.

My mom, and Alison, damn it, no, was the start of all of this. She would like to know why I was asking.

They would just swing at me. If I let me even guess I am in trouble, the would be in my ass, I did not go with all that was around me.

I needed to talk to someone, more than just Emmah. They could help me. It is not that I do not delegate it is that I do not trust.

Her approval of my choice was reflected in my skin and its color.

She missed everything that was in the past, yet had all my memories too, even though she gave me the ring, from my past too.

I wonder why. 'Strange Shit'.

I muttered, getting up to wash my hands and face until someone came to check on me.

'Strange days.'

I jumped with my name that had been called at that moment for me to come.

'I am the only one that you can trust.' Emmah said.

Using her little fingers, she pushed the show box lid off. I opened it and almost dropped what I was going to hold to change my feelings.

I remember your beloved twin. I do I have the soul of her within you now, it was all locked away by me in this crystal ball.

Let the prophases tell you what it is that you are sacking to find out.

- 'Oh.'

They both smiled at me when they showed their faces in the glassy like reflections when I saw that, I was back with them at that time, and sat down at all the moments.

'What's that?' I knew it was. My fingers hovered over my chain. It was gold to me, yet had moments of a glowing silver, and in its center lay a small charm in the shape of my fingernails.

All the nights and days play over, 'It's a crescent moon.' He said, still bouncing on his beloved, on the wedding night. 'A gift for our love.'

The rebound bounce went to my mind unscrupulous. 'Sounds like a bribe, with the thoughts of sin.'

'The Bribe?' He sounded too innocent.

'You have made a Bible.'

...And in that some moment in that fragment of time, the box slammed shut, and I put it between us, saying my angel.

'Yes, a bribe.' I said Emmah. A book of life, and the afterlife.

Part:

'You have what you need?' If it is too much, I can always get back to all these junctures.

Then I had to ask, right? I am sure we can do something to have me come back to the person I was before the termination of my past life's. Let me just call you Emma to find out when I will be free... from my fear'

'It's not comical.' She frowned at me. You are this world's Goddesses.

I found it humorous to think that a girl like me could be that even in remembrance. I will do all this commemoration with you.'

'Why me?'

'I feel bad about wanting to spend time with you. The least I can do is make sure you get something out of it.' Said Nevaeh.

She told me to start thinking clearly.

Goosebumps ran down my spine to see if she noticed. She looked down at me, grinning at the corners of her mouth. 'Your eyes are glowing blue, understand what this means, it means you are back to the way you once were.'

'Oh, just not again!' Swabbing her newfound spiritual sight and eyes, now currently they were crying, I do not know if I want to do this again.

'I don't know how to turn them off.' This is the moment of finding out the feeling of love you still have for all those you still care about, and even the ones that have wronged you.

She never wanted me to turn them off, it was something I just needed to see and do.

Several times in the morning I would do this in my youth also, I would wake up and scare myself to death by my tears, taking the pain of others.

Part:

All I wanted to do was wash my face. Instead, I almost went blind seeing what happened to Emmah in the past seeing the worlds I was part of, they were worse than the blinding headlights and glass shards in the retinas of a car crash as you are discarded from the vehicle, even if I thought they were consequential.

As they lit up to become exposed there was a new light, I saw her behind it all. Her love was going out and ending, even when I was sleeping to the moments of time, I was not there.

I then frowned in that wink as she tilted her head to get a better view of me. I cut off all the feelings.

'Which one?'

'All.' I spoke.

'I never knew what I was to all of them.'